Guilds & Groups

The Last Legion

By Robert J. Schwalb

Illustrations by Chris Seaman and Wayne England

"The soldiers may change, but the Last Legion lives on. What does this mean? Well, friend, it means that the Legion is bigger than us soldiers. It has a history and a place in the world—it's even got character. In my time, I've seen all sorts of characters come and go. Some people have been good and brave; others, not so much.

"So you want to join. That's swell. Just so we don't waste anyone's time, what are you going to do for us?"

TM & © 2011 Wizards of the Coast LLC. All rights reserved.

Look anywhere in the Nentir Valley, and you're bound to see Nerath. The signs are everywhere. Roads winding through the hilly countryside once served as arteries of that great nation. The keeps, castles, and towns are diminished but still reflect glints of the greatness they once had, when they were the bones of humanity's last empire. Milestones line the roads. Statues in overgrown gardens commemorate the deeds and accomplishments of forgotten heroes. In places, Nerath retains some of its old character, but for the most part, the old nation is a carcass stretched along history's roadside, with carrion eaters out in full force to pick its bones clean.

Nerath died with its last king in the fruitless war against monstrous invaders, yet its memory survives. It lingers in the tales spun by bards before captivated crowds hungry to hear about the trials of Ser Kent or the Lady in the White Tower. The stirring poetry of "The Last Ride of Elidyr" still brings a tear when people reflect on what was lost and the grim times in which they live. These are tales, to be sure, but these stories feed the listeners' hearts and minds. They give hope to the hopeless, instill passion in the destitute, and provide a vision for better days ahead.

The last kingdom of humans lives on in other ways beyond the songs and stories: It lives in the deeds of those inspired by them. The old knightly orders collapsed along with their chapter houses, but more and more heroes tumble out from the darkness, armed with ancient relics long thought to be lost and flushed with recent victory over terrible monsters. These heroes keep alive King Elidyr's vision for a brighter world. The greatest among them might even earn a place among the surviving few who keep the signal fires burning for the day when the king returns and justice prevails once more.

One such group is the Last Legion, and its exploits are the fuel of legends.

History

It all began with the orcs. Nerath's fourth king was a feckless heir with an eye and an appetite for hedonistic distractions and none of the discipline or devotion shown by his sire. Albrect the Unworthy, as he was called, cowered on his throne as the orc hordes tramped out from the mountains to pillage. The raiders plundered the nation of its treasure and enslaved its people. Each victory emboldened the orcs to push farther across the border, and each dark cloud smearing the horizon tightened panic's grip on the young empire's heart.

Nerath was not prepared for the hordes. After its initial expansion, the nation turned its attention away from military ambition. The highest military ranks were bought and sold for prestige or were handed out as favors by a king who had little regard for what happened beyond his palace doors. Grasping fools, sycophants, and hangers-on became ranking officers, and all were strangers to merit. The one exception among this unfortunate lot—the man who spared the empire from a sudden and early end—was Captain Michael Forsythe, known as Cunning to those under his leadership.

Forsythe was not a man accustomed to handing out flattery. He played politics as deftly as a dolphin strums a lute. His abrasive manner landed him in command of the disgraced Third Legion. Its soldiers were criminals, thieves, and murderers for the most part, thrown into military service until they could pay off their crimes. The Third Legion was deemed expendable, so it always got the most dangerous missions. It hunted trolls in the Cairngorm Peaks, rooted out goblins from the Deepening Pits, and fought skirmishes against the Court of Serathal, a minor elven kingdom now little more than a footnote in the land's history. The Third was always stationed at the frontier, far from the fashionable capital and prosperous cities.

Meanwhile, Nerath's other legions were in disarray. The worst generals lived like kings on gold embezzled from their soldiers' pay, while their troops pawned their weapons and armor to buy food and lodging. As the horde grew bolder, those commanders who recognized the danger fled the cities and barricaded themselves inside their castles, taking along the best soldiers of their legions as an elite troop of guards and leaving the rest to fend for themselves. The king was alone and terrified. The legions needed time to reorganize themselves from within, promote leaders of quality, and march to meet the invaders.

Only the Third Legion was in a position to block the advancing enemy. The king sent orders to hold off the invaders until the nation could mobilize a proper defense. A lesser man than Captain Forsythe would have seen only the inevitability of failure. Forsythe accepted his suicidal orders and marched his mob of murderers and thieves to Freydor's Gap, a mountain pass through which the orcs had to advance. The Third arrived only hours ahead of the horde. Soldiers hastily occupied a long-abandoned chain of Turathi fortifications that commanded the pass. The orcs and their allies hurled themselves against the crumbling walls for three weeks. Attackers died by the thousands, yet onward they came,

heedless of the corpses that tumbled down the siege ladders to form reeking mounds that clogged the pass.

After three weeks of almost constant fighting, only a few hundred remained of the Third Legion's original three thousand, but these survivors still stood atop their blood-soaked walls while the orcs roared and rattled their weapons while remaining on the hills below the pass. By the time the reorganized legions arrived to relieve the Third, they had little to do but mop up stragglers and pursue the defeated horde back across the border.

The Third Legion's reward for saving the empire was no more than a pardon for those few soldiers who survived. It remained a penal division, so that its replacements were more criminals, mercenaries, and adventuring scum with no place in the more formal legions that were once again led by pampered nobles and opportunists. But among the professional soldiers of Nerath, the Third had won a reputation as the toughest, hardest-fighting force in the army. Through the generations that followed, the Third's fighting spirit never faltered and its reputation among the legions never declined.

Had the Third been present for the Last Battle against the White Ruin, perhaps the outcome would have been different. Elidyr or one of his sons might have survived; maybe Nerath would still exist today. But the Third Legion was absent. It had been sent away by Elidyr's eldest son, Roland, who used his influence to move the legion to the remotest outposts. He did so because he coveted a woman who was betrothed to the commander of the Third Legion, a veteran named Paulus. Roland hoped that with leagues between them, she would forget Paulus and welcome Roland's advances. While Roland courted the young woman, the demonic army spilled into Nerath. The Third was too far away to lend aid, and humankind's empire collapsed.

By the time the Third Legion learned what was happening and marched back to the center of the Empire, it was fighting alone. The citizens were slaughtered, the capital was in ruins, and most of the gnolls were already withdrawing into the wilderness. Paulus pursued them to the borders and beyond, killing every monster that the Legion could overtake, but every soldier knew that they were too late to make a difference and too few in number to hold the nation together. Nerath was dead.

Since his soldiers were now the sole survivors of the entire Nerathan army, Paulus thought it made no sense to address them as the Third Legion, so he rechristened them the Last Legion. He led them for many more years, which were devoted to safeguarding whatever could be salvaged from the once-great kingdom to scouring the land of the worst horrors still lurking there.

ADAPTING THE LEGION

The Last Legion's story assumes game play occurs in the Nentir Vale. The concepts and events discussed are broad enough that you can adapt them to whatever setting you like. What follows are a few suggestions for the major Dungeons & Dragons® game worlds.

In the Forgotten Realms® setting, the Spellplague transformed the landscape, erasing entire nations when Abeir returned. The Last Legion might have been born in Mulhorand, Unther, Chondath, or Halruaa, and now it fights in the memory of its forgotten people.

In the Eberron® setting, the Last Legion was one of Cyre's most distinguished units in the Last War and survived by being absent when the magical catastrophe ruined its homeland.

In the Dark Sun® setting, the Last Legion once hailed from doomed Yaramuke, where it was a proud legion among the city-state's best. Hamanu shattered the city-state while the Last Legion was skirmishing against forces of Raam. With its city in ruins, the Last Legion now drifts across the wastes, selling its swords to the highest bidder.

The Last Legion Organization

None of the soldiers who fought in the Third have lived to the present day, and not a single soldier who claims membership in the Last Legion knew any of them. What they have are the old stories and histories as well as the legends and mystique tied to the Last Legion's name. There might be different faces in the organization, but their objectives are the same as when the group was founded.

Goal: The Last Legion works to protect what remains of Nerath and, perhaps one day, to reunite the land under its banner once more.

Stated Goal: Most know the Last Legion as a mercenary band formed to hunt and exterminate monsters.

Size: The Legion's numbers change as members perish or retire and new recruits join. At most, the Last Legion has a couple of hundred members in the main force with agents scattered across most towns in the Nentir Vale and elsewhere.

Alignment: Good.

Philosophy: "We keep Nerath's memory alive by preserving the past against the enemies of today. Through our deeds and actions, we inspire others to reach farther and become more than society expects them to be. We will fight until the king returns and relieves us of duty."

History: Since the Last Legion formed, it has undergone many missions, fought for many masters, and drifted from place to place. It has been absent from the Nentir Vale for the last few years while fighting in the ruins of Nydor, a large city to the west that fell to the gnolls years ago. After suffering a terrible defeat, the Legion drifted back into the Vale to find recruits to join the ranks.

Leadership: The battle-scarred half-elf Captain Rule, whose real name is Elsa Kristoff, took command three years ago when her predecessor, Ryken Masterson, fell to a poisoned drow quarrel during an ambush in the ruined city. Rule rallied the force and organized a series of counterattacks. After weeks of ambush and reprisal in the twisting, rubble-strewn streets, casualties mounted to the point where the legion had to withdraw. Rule vowed to return and cleanse the ruins once the legion is rebuilt to full strength.

Headquarters: The Last League is the organization's headquarters, and its base is wherever it makes camp. The captain and her officers occupy a tight cluster of tents at the camp's center .

Membership Requirements: Recruiters prowl towns and villages, looking for mercenaries and adventurers first, militia second. They welcome mages, priests, soldiers, and thieves. Anyone who has a talent that can aid the Legion is accepted.

Structure: The Legion abides by a strict military hierarchy with the captain at the top, followed by brigadiers, lieutenants, sergeants, corporals, and privates. Organization is by fours: the captain commands four brigadiers, a brigadier commands four lieutenants, and so on down the chain of command. The exception is at the bottom, where a corporal commands ten privates. At full strength, this structure gives the legion 2,900 soldiers, plus the captain. Various specialists round it out to 3,000. The only time the legion is at full strength, however, is at the end of an extended period of recruiting and training in a quiet region. A few months of hard fighting will thin its ranks tremendously.

Only those who display courage and leadership can climb the ranks. Officers can recommend candidates for promotion, but such advancements occur solely at the captain's discretion and only when command positions are open. Field promotions are frequent when the legion is on campaign and casualties are heavy.

Activities: Evil humanoids, strange monsters, dragons, aberrant mutants, and other threats to civilization all have something to fear from the Last Legion. Its size and organization suit it to fighting as an army against massed enemies such as marauding goblin tribes and orc hordes. It also can operate in smaller units to patrol ruined cities for undead or stalk bands of bullywugs and lizardfolk through swamps.

Not every mission, however, operates on a large scale. A vampire lurking in a fortified stronghold could hold out against an army indefinitely. A red dragon could wreak havoc on soldiers formed into ranks and files. To deal with unusual foes when traditional fighting methods won't work, the Last Legion employs smaller teams. These units consist of five or six trained professionals, each with a wide range of abilities to ensure that the group works smoothly together. These teams undertake a variety of missions including assassination, espionage, and

sabotage. Most assignments are like those that are commonly tackled by freelance adventuring groups.

Enemies: The Last Legion has more enemies than it has friends. Declaring war against evil humanoids and monsters means the organization doesn't need to wait long before someone comes to collect their pound of flesh. Aside from the various tribes that have tangled with the Legion, this army also has the enmity of at least one necromancer, a rakshasa prince, several vampires, no fewer than four dragons, and several powerful devils.

Rivals: Not everyone for whom the Last Legion fights is thrilled about its efforts. Petty nobles and local militias resent the Legion's meddling and object when they are pressed into helping in a fight that they didn't start. Mercenary bands have little reason to love the Legion, because the Legion isn't bashful about taking control of any operation and even double-crossing the competition to secure regular pay. In particular, the Crimson Blade, a smaller force operating out of the decadent southern cities, has crossed paths and spears with the Legion on several occasions, usually over treasure or battle honors.

Joining the Last Legion

As the Last Legion moves across the countryside, it sends recruiters into nearby villages and towns. A recruitment party typically consists of a scribe, several attractive soldiers (male and female) in splendid armor to awe the impressionable youth, and a wagon loaded with enticing weapons, shields, and light armor ready to be buckled onto new recruits. If enough new privates can't be signed up, then the recruiter is likely to confer with the local constable and offer to take certain types of criminals off his hands. Criminal draftees are sometimes unreliable, but most are happy to give up imprisonment, forced labor, or a noose in exchange for regular meals and pay, even with danger and harsh discipline mixed in. The Third Legion was a penal battalion, and Captain Rule understands the value of carrying on that tradition.

Recruiters also watch for adventuring bands that can be enlisted as special tactical units. The Legion doesn't waste its effort on veteran bands (unless they approach the Legion with an offer), because experienced adventurers are too set in their ways. Instead, recruiters look for raw adventurers who have more talent than experience. Steady pay rather than the uncertain prospect of loot is a powerful lure for would-be heroes. Once the adventurers are in the Legion, officers can guide their development, discharge troublesome members, and reorganize groups to maximize their team capability.

Military life isn't for everyone, so the Legion carefully screens adventuring bands to ensure their suitability. Discipline and obedience are key. A recruit must respect the chain of command and follow orders. Sergeants are skilled at drilling these traits into soldiers, so a little wildness is acceptable. The Legion also doesn't care who candidates were or what they did before joining. Soldiers who follow orders and fight with courage are no longer murderers, fugitives, thieves, or arsonists; they are legionnaires and nothing else.

Last Legion Benefits

Being a member of the Last Legion carries many responsibilities, but it also provides many benefits. When you are accepted into the organization, you gain the following benefits by tier.

Heroic Tier: The Last Legion pays its recruits. Pay equals the character's level x 10 gp, paid monthly. It covers incidental expenses, clothing, and personal upkeep. While traveling with the Legion, a recruit receives three square meals a day and a tent to sleep in. The Legion also supplies recruits with one mundane weapon, a suit of leather armor, a small shield, and a colored armband or sash to indicate which unit they belong to. It is common for pay to be deferred while the Legion is on campaign, with one bulk payment at the end.

Paragon Tier: In addition to the heroic tier benefits, tactical teams can requisition mundane items, horses, and land vehicles such as wagons, within reasonable limits. A team leader can request unusual equipment and specialists (engineers, interpreters, specialized wizards, trained animals) on a case-by-case basis. Specialists are companion characters of a lower level than the party's level. The DM creates these characters as needed, using the companion character rules (*Dungeon Master's Guide 2*, page 27).

For more muscle or for flank or rear security, teams might also bring one or two squads of legionnaires on their missions. The party can request up to four soldiers per character on the mission, subject to the approval of their commander (as determined by the DM). The following statistics block represents a typical Last Legion soldier for paragon tier parties. Legionnaires are tough and determined; they follow

orders and stay on duty until either the mission is complete or they are slain.

Last Legion Veteran	**Level 11 Minion Soldier**
Medium natural humanoid	**XP –**
HP 1; a missed attack never damages a minion.	**Initiative** +8
AC 24, **Fortitude** 24, **Reflex** 22, **Will** 21	**Perception** +7
Speed 5	
Traits	
Disciplined Ranks	
The veteran gains a +2 bonus to AC while adjacent to another Last Legion veteran.	
Standard Actions	
Spear (weapon) ✦ **At-Will**	
Attack: Melee 1 (one creature); +18 vs. AC	
Hit: 9 damage, and if the target makes an attack that does not include the veteran on its next turn, it takes 3 damage and the veteran can shift 1 square as a free action.	
Crossbow (weapon) ✦ **At-Will**	
Attack: Ranged 10 (one creature); +16 vs. AC	
Hit: 6 damage.	
Str 18 (+9) **Dex** 13 (+6) **Wis** 14 (+7)	
Con 14 (+7) **Int** 10 (+5) **Cha** 11 (+5)	
Alignment unaligned **Languages** Common	
Equipment scale armor, heavy shield, spear, crossbow, 10 bolts	

Missions

The Last Legion puts its soldiers to good use. The following quests represent the sorts of missions a team might undertake.

Assassination: The village of Ashendale has a new lord. A distant relation to the late Baron Caldwell, this young man has brought with him strange customs and practices, all of which suggest he is in thrall to a dark and alien power. Since he came to power, the town has been transformed into a military encampment, and the townsfolk are worked literally to death forging weapons and armor for the orc mercenaries the new baron has hired. Misthollow, a neighboring town, hired the Last Legion to deal with the orcs after raids left its fields in ashes and took several of its people. Captain Rule knows a direct attack could work, but it would also result in unacceptable civilian casualties. The heroes must infiltrate the town and take out the baron. Once they have done so, the Legion will strike.

Capture: After Pylus Cree betrayed his companions in the 9th squad (an act of treachery that led to their deaths), he fled to Fallcrest, where he's lying low. Cree is a slippery sort, and agents sent to bring him back for trial and punishment have yet to return. The characters are the next band assigned to track him down and capture him. At this point, Captain Rule just wants Cree brought back; she doesn't care whether he is alive or dead. Finding Cree in Fallcrest is no easy task, because he has friends in the town. The adventurers will need to grease palms, overcome obstacles, and placate officials if they want to find the deserter.

Espionage: Caravan after caravan goes missing on the Trade Road between Fallcrest and Hammerfast. Merchants have become worried, and citizens in each community tighten their belts because needed supplies aren't making it to them. The trouble is that no one knows who or what is behind the attacks. So before the Last Legion goes stumbling into a fight against an unknown enemy, the adventurers and other teams are sent out into the foothills marching up to the Dawnforge Mountains. The heroes must gather intelligence about these brigands, ascertain their numbers, locate their strongholds, and avoid engagements whenever possible.

Exploration: One morning, after the fog burned offs, locals spotted a tower they had never seen before breaking the Winterbole Forest's canopy. Fearing that the tower's appearance presages a disaster, the rural folk turn to the Last Legion, which is moving east to deal with undead spreading out from the Ruins of Fastormel. The characters are sent to investigate the tower—if only to assuage the locals' fears.

Sabotage: An enemy force bloodies the Legion's nose, forcing the ragged remnants into a retreat. The enemy pursues at a cautious rate, following after them and sending raiders to strike at their flanks. The Legion comes to a bridge spanning a wide, rushing river. With the enemy hot on its heels, the Legion commander decides that this is the last best chance to slow down opponents. It falls to the adventurers to hold off the attackers until the rest of the Legion can destroy the bridge.

Trailblazing: Snow fills the Axe Bite Pass through the Stonemarch, forcing the Last Legion to sweep around the mountains to get to Icanthole, a small city north and west of the Nentir Vale. Time is essential, since the Legion must be in position to meet an invading orc army spilling down from the northlands. The heroes are sent to blaze a trail through the mountains and locate a different and safer route to speed the army on its way.

Last Legion Feats

Those recruited by the Last Legion receive special training to increase their chances at survival and also to encourage teamwork and cooperation. Player characters have several means at their disposal to deal with their opponents already, so the following feats offer ways to customize characters to reflect their service to this storied organization. Although any character can take these feats, consider making them available only to the organization's current membership.

Last Legion Ambusher

Benefit: When you miss an enemy with an encounter attack power and that enemy is granting combat advantage to you, the next attack from your allies that hits the enemy before the start of your next turn deals 2 extra damage. The extra damage increases to 4 at 11th level and 6 at 21st level.

Last Legion Defender

Benefit: When you hit with an opportunity attack while you're using a shield, you and one ally adjacent to you gain a +2 bonus to AC until the start of your next turn.

Last Legion Officer

Benefit: When you use a power that would enable an ally to spend a healing surge, that ally can also choose to shift 1 square as a free action or gain a +2 bonus to AC and Reflex until the start of his or her next turn.

Seasoned Veteran

Benefit: You gain a +1 feat bonus to initiative checks and to saving throws against fear effects. This bonus increases by 1 for each ally within 5 squares of you who also has this feat (maximum +5).

Stalwart Sentinel

Benefit: You gain a +2 feat bonus to Perception checks.

If you are adjacent to another ally who has this feat, the bonus increases to +4 when you're using Perception to detect a hidden enemy.

If you're asleep, you do not take the -5 penalty to hear things.

About the Author

Robert J. Schwalb is an award-winning game designer who has contributed design to or developed over one hundred roleplaying game titles for Dungeons & Dragons®, *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay*, *A Song of Ice and Fire RPG*, *Star Wars RPG*, and the *d20 system*. Some of his most recent work for Wizards of the Coast can be found in *Monster Manual 3*™, *Player's Handbook 3*™, *Martial Power 2*™, and in the pages of both *Dragon* and *Dungeon* magazines. Robert lives in Tennessee.

Updated: February 15, 2011

Class Acts

Bards of Wolfstone

By Robert J. Schwalb
Illustration by Ryan Pancoast

Steel clashes. Screams pierce the interminable night. Snow crunches underfoot. A wolf howls.

Hrethnir pressed his back to the battlements, clutching his sword to his breast, trying not to breathe lest its fog give away his position. He knew if he looked behind him, he'd find an ice-blue eye set in an enormous face, blue skinned, white haired—the hunting frost giant's visage. Hrethnir had not survived a dozen Wolfstone winters by being reckless. He knew when to cut his losses and where to find his opportunities. His squad lay dead all around. The warrior Fethrik's unseeing gaze peered out from his severed head. The body lay crumpled against the far wall.

More crunching. More howling. Shouts. Screams.

TM & © 2011 Wizards of the Coast LLC. All rights reserved.

This was the fourth time the frost giants had attacked in as many weeks. They brought blizzards and bitter cold, their witches throwing wind and ice alike against the old fortress's battlements as easily as a soldier might shoot arrows. The losses had been costly. With no reinforcements to be had aside from the smattering of dwarves who kept to themselves in the old tunnels, it seemed the gods had turned their back on Nerath's last defenders.

Hrethnir wiped his nose with the back of his hand, breaking icicles loose from his frozen beard. Was this his day to die? Would he go the way of Fethrik, Angus, and Hastik?

Something shot through the air over Hrethnir's head. The searching giant howled.

Without thinking, Hrethnir rolled away from the sheltering stone, ripping his sword up to put its point between him and his foe. From the corner of his eye, he saw his brothers climbing the steps, shaggy forms, axes and shields slick with frozen blood. Ahead, the frost giant staggered back, pawing at the bolt in its eye. It dislodged the dart and swung an axe with a head several horse lengths across. The weapon bit deep into a tower, sending stones and debris flying. Hrethnir knew he would not survive without help. He would die like all the others.

He shouted to his comrades as they struggled up from the debris. He urged them forward, calling out and reminding them of their duty and legacy. As he sang their praises, the giant drew back its arm for another strike. Hrethnir found courage in his magic and strength in the memory living in the stones beneath his feet. The cold, the pain, the fear all melted away. Here and there, wispy white forms made from swirling snow rose from the corpses, taking the forms of the bold warriors lying dead upon the battlements. On and on Hrethnir sang, until the wall came to life with the spirits of Wolfstone and the living defenders sworn to fight for its name.

Doubt creased the giant's features, and for the first time, Hrethnir, singer, poet, and warrior, found the strength he needed to lead his people to victory.

The isolation and inhospitable climate of Wolfstone alone would make living there a challenge. But the frost giants, winter wolves, and other terrors surging down from the glaciers mean that only the hardiest souls stand a chance at surviving to see another winter. The community known as Wolfstone (introduced in "On Civilization's Fringes: Humans of the Wild" in *Dragon* 386) is one of many fringe societies surviving against the odds. The challenges of Wolfstone's environment have left their mark on the inhabitants, who saw their civilized traditions fall away with each generation, until the warm sun and urban comforts became remote memories, almost myths.

These hardships changed more than just customs. In particular, the arcane techniques once used by the citadel's wizards deteriorated as knowledge was lost and suitable apprentices became scarcer with each generation. Primal energy suffuses this place, leading many users of arcane magic to also draw on the power of the primal spirits. Nowhere is this practice more apparent than with the bards.

Wolfstone's bards are among the most important people in the stronghold. The warriors look to the bards to restore their courage—to give them hope. The bards recount the heroes' deeds and shame the craven to action. They are historians and storytellers, but also combatants, fighting shoulder to shoulder with the berserkers and other soldiers.

The bards of Wolfstone supplement their arcane knowledge with primal evocations. The lands are rich in such magic. Many bards might dabble as druids or shamans, but Wolfstone bards' ability to successfully weave arcane and primal rites sets them apart from their counterparts in other lands.

The spirits these bards commune with are things of wind and snow, the memories of fallen warriors, and the blood staining the citadel's stones. Through careful application of arcane magic, the bards coax these spirits forth and bind them to allies or secure their aid in defending their homes. The effects are profound, for when a bard recalls a fallen warrior's achievements, the spirit of the warrior might well hear those words and join the struggle.

Although the mechanics presented here support bards from Wolfstone, you can modify this material to fit another region. Perhaps your character lives among an elven community that has strong ties to the natural world. Or your character might have had roots in primal magic, then turned away to pursue arcane study.

Creating a Wolfstone Bard

The Wolfstone bard is a rarity among the minstrels and tricksters making up the bard class. In some people's eyes, these bards have abandoned the bardic traditions that have passed down through the ages and sullied their magic by communing with primal spirits. Though some Wolfstone bards do mingle the arcane and primal arts, they have not drifted so far from their kin. They truly are bards.

To create a Wolfstone bard, you can build either a multiclass character or a hybrid character.

Most bards from this land are hybrids blending barbarian or shaman features with their bardic ones. This approach does not limit your access to primal power to the number of feats you invest. You give up the bard's Multiclass Versatility feature in exchange for a strong array of features from your other hybrid class.

If you prefer multiclassing, several multiclass feats from *Player's Handbook® 2* can allow you to branch out into primal classes. Spirit Talker and Initiate of the Old Faith enable you to mimic the shaman or the druid. If you plan to fight on the front lines, Berserker's Fury and Defender of the Wild are better choices.

Wolfstone was founded as a human community during Nerath's golden age. Though Nerath is no more, humans remain the most numerous people here. Dwarves have entered the old halls, and have lent their axes and hammers to protect the fastness. Thus, most bards from this region are either human or dwarf.

In addition to the powers presented below, you should focus on aggressive powers that rely on weapons over implements. Skill powers, especially those that use Intimidate or Nature, are great ways to demonstrate the character concept.

The mythic skald from *Dragon* 376 is the ideal paragon path for the Wolfstone bard, but it does require a primal class (attained by way of at least one multiclass feat or a hybrid class). If you don't have a primal class by the time you reach the paragon tier, the voice of thunder and war chanter paragon paths (both from *Player's Handbook 2*) are good alternatives.

The following encounter attack powers let you combine arcane power and primal power in the same attack, and call up spirits to assist you.

Level 3: Rally the Spectral Host

Your arcane senses reveal the primal essences swirling around you. The further you investigate, the more it becomes clear these entities were heroes—warriors who stood fast against the darkness. Using your weapon as a focus for your spell, you coax these spirits forth to aid your allies in the struggle.

Rally the Spectral Host **Bard Attack 3**

An aggressive strike calls forth the spirits of fallen warriors to stand at your side.

Encounter ✦ Arcane, Aura, Primal, Weapon
Standard Action **Melee** weapon
Target: One creature
Attack: Charisma vs. AC
Hit: 2[W] + Charisma modifier damage.
Effect: You activate an aura 2 that lasts until the end of your next turn. While in the aura, any ally gains a +1 power bonus to attack rolls and a +2 power bonus to damage rolls.

Level 7: Wrath of Wolfstone

Among those fighting to protect Wolfstone, the most fearsome were the berserkers. Their bloodlust blinded them to danger, and they fought on long after most would have succumbed to the same wounds. When you cast *wrath of Wolfstone*, you recall the primal spirit that gave these warriors their power.

Wrath of Wolfstone **Bard Attack 7**

You conjure the spirit of a Wolfstone berserker and use arcane magic to focus its wild fury against your foes.

Encounter ✦ Arcane, Cold, Conjuration, Primal, Weapon
Standard Action **Melee** or **Ranged** weapon
Target: One creature
Attack: Charisma vs. Reflex
Hit: 2[W] + Charisma modifier cold damage.
Effect: You conjure the spirit of a Wolfstone berserker in an unoccupied square adjacent to the target. The conjuration lasts until the end of your next turn or until you dismiss it as a free action. Any enemy that ends its turn adjacent to the berserker takes 5 cold damage, and you can slide the enemy 1 square.

Level 17: Spectral Vanguard

Your long familiarity with primal spirits allows you to summon them forth from the spirit world. Your words and songs, imbued with arcane magic, stir old memories—the echoes of warriors who once fought as you do now. When you cast *spectral vanguard*, your foes see firsthand the doom that awaits them.

Spectral Vanguard **Bard Attack 17**

As you swing your blade, you shout lines from an ancient saga, summoning forth its heroes to lend their aid.

Encounter ✦ Arcane, Aura, Primal, Weapon
Standard Action **Melee** weapon
Target: One creature
Attack: Charisma vs. AC
Hit: 3[W] + Charisma modifier damage.
Effect: You activate an aura 3 that lasts until the end of your next turn. While in the aura, you and your allies have a +2 power bonus to all defenses. In addition, whenever any enemy ends its turn in the aura, you can slide it up to 2 squares.

Level 23: White Wolves

Wolfstone takes its name from the cruel white wolves that stalk the glacier and the mountain slopes. This spell lets you bind these wicked spirits for a time and put their savage ferocity to good use.

White Wolves **Bard Attack 23**

You lament the lives lost to the white wolves. So stirring is your song that it draws the howling pack from the spirit world.

Encounter ✦ Arcane, Cold, Primal, Weapon, Zone
Standard Action **Close** blast 5
Target: Each enemy in the blast
Attack: Charisma vs. Fortitude
Hit: 2[W] + Charisma modifier cold damage, and the target falls prone.
Effect: The blast creates a zone that lasts until the end of your next turn. Any enemy that ends its turn in the zone takes 5 cold damage, and it is immobilized until the end of its next turn.

New Feats

Focusing on your art, lore, and fighting techniques helps you discover new ways to apply your bardic training. The following feats provide new options for bards to demonstrate their talent with primal magic.

Battle Cadence

You learn to shape your words not only to help your companions find heart and courage, but also to unleash the anger seething within them.

Prerequisite: Bard, *majestic word* power

Benefit: When you use *majestic word*, you can slide the target 1 extra square. The target also gains a +2 bonus to the next damage roll he or she makes before the end of his or her next turn.

Wild Virtue

Anytime you invoke and celebrate a virtue through song or poetry, you stir up primal spirits that goad you into action.

Prerequisite: Bard, Bardic Virtue class feature

Benefit: Each time you use your Bardic Virtue, you can shift 1 square as a free action.

Words of Wrath

Not every negotiation can be won through calmness and reason. Sometimes a simple threat can speed a discussion to a swift and satisfactory conclusion.

Prerequisite: Bard, training in Intimidate, *words of friendship* power

Benefit: You gain a +2 feat bonus to Intimidate checks.

Also, when you use *words of friendship*, you can choose for the power bonus to apply to the next Intimidate check you make before the end of your next turn, instead of the next Diplomacy check.

About the Author

Robert J. Schwalb is an award-winning game designer who has contributed design to or developed nearly two hundred roleplaying game titles for the Dungeons & Dragons® game, *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay*, *A Song of Ice and Fire Roleplaying Game*, *Star Wars Roleplaying Game*, and the d20 System. Some of his more recent work for Wizards of the Coast can be found in D&D Gamma World®: *Famine in Far-Go*, Dark Sun® *Campaign Setting*, and *Monster Manual*® 3. Also, he's a regular contributor to both *Dragon* and *Dungeon* magazines. For more information about the author, be sure to check out his website at www.robertjschwalb.com.

Class Acts
Hierophant Druids

By Robert J. Schwalb
Illustration by David Rapoza

Druids are the world's protectors. Their work ensures that the natural world remains free from aberrant threats, from exploitation by the gods, and from despoliation by the primordials and demons whose hate for creation is boundless. Many druids undertake this mission alone; they wander the land, going where they are needed to safeguard the world. Stories persist of world-spanning orders of druids who combine their talents to uphold the bulwark against the world's foes and to stand fast against the dire threats that emerge from beyond the world's bounds. Several such orders are believed to exist, each led by a Grand Druid who shapes the organization's agenda and serves as a peacekeeping envoy to other societies. Then again, these factions might be different chapters in one much larger and much more powerful institution.

There are those who argue against the idea of a monolithic organization, and they need only point to the Hierophantic Cabal as proof. The members of this organization, known as Hierophant druids, have moved beyond evoking what they consider to be quaint, anthropomorphic spirits, and because of that, the higher orders of druids have deemed them to be a subversive element. Hierophants view the world and its energies from a unique perspective. These druids regard spirits and the spirit world as indistinguishable from a larger and vastly more powerful entity: primal energy itself. The Hierophants believe that primal magic arises from an energy field that is a residual of the elemental substance that formed all things. The extent of its power can be understood only by those who have an equal understanding of the fundamental forces that shaped the newborn world. This preoccupation with elemental power creates tension between the Hierophantic Cabal and traditional druids.

The Hierophants of the Cabal

Goal: The cabal is an intellectual society driven to understand the fundamental forces that brought the world into existence. The druids who comprise it look beyond the characteristics that are commonly assigned to primal magic and embrace what they believe is its true form.

Size: The number of Hierophant druids is small, and they are scattered across the world and the Elemental Chaos. Opposition from mainstream druids

TM & © 2011 Wizards of the Coast LLC. All rights reserved.

forces the Hierophants to work in secret and conceal their activities whenever possible.

Alignment: Unaligned.

Philosophy: "The spirits with whom our brethren commune are nothing more than products of our collective delusion. They are energy only. Assigning them motivations and personalities limits how we can safeguard this world from the enemy without."

History: The cabal took shape centuries ago, not as a result of civilization's intrusion into the wilderness but from the wilderness's intrusion into civilization. Refined thinking and new ideas encouraged the cabal's founders to regard primal magic in a different light and to apply reason and logic to the often wild and chaotic primal energy.

Leadership: The current High Hierophant is a human named Asteron. He attained his position by defeating the previous High Hierophant in single combat. Under his influence, the Hierophants have begun operating more openly, and that openness is causing new friction with other druidic leaders.

Headquarters: Asteron oversees the Hierophants from his home on Windstone, an earthmote adrift in the Elemental Chaos. Elemental thralls bound by primal magic protect the stronghold from attack and from the plane's warping influence.

Structure: The Hierophants consist of several dozen autonomous members scattered across the world and the Elemental Chaos. Each Hierophant might have servants and soldiers for protection, but these forces are small to avoid attracting attention. The Hierophants muster once every decade or so for fellowship, discussion, and recruitment.

Membership Requirements: Player character druids can join the Hierophants by invitation only (if you'd like to join, discuss the possibility with your DM). The Hierophants look for extensive knowledge of primal magic and flawless execution of evocations. Prospective members must also demonstrate a familiarity with elemental magic. Most Hierophants are sentinels or guardians. Predators and swarm druids are rarely invited to join.

Activities: Protecting the world and upholding the primal ban are as important to the Hierophants as they are for other druids. Hierophants take a wider view of their charge, however, believing that all of the universe falls under their responsibility. They extend their interest to all the planes. Hierophants regard the Abyss as one of the gravest threats, and many fight against its intrusion into the Elemental Chaos.

When not battling demons or aberrant creatures from the Far Realm, Hierophants focus on mastering the fundamental substance used to create the world. Usually this task involves finding new ways to blend elemental magic with primal evocations, to push against the boundaries of what's possible with primal power alone. They might seek out lost lore to uncover reserves of elemental power, or deal with elemental agencies to learn their secrets.

Enemies: To traditionalists, the Hierophants and their efforts undermine the entire purpose of the druids' work. Polluting primal magic with elemental power is a high crime that must be opposed at every turn lest the primordials regain their power and unravel the world as they tried to do so long ago. These conservative druids actively oppose the Hierophants, and open war has broken out in the past.

Druids affiliated with the Hierophants have access to unusual evocations that demonstrate their interest in elemental magic. Although these powers are intended for characters who are members of the organization, any druid can select them in place of those ordinarily available at the respective levels.

Level 22: Elemental Passage

You realize the fundamental kinship between the natural world and the Elemental Chaos and can move freely between these realms. However, when you return from the Elemental Chaos, you bring back some of the energy of that dire plane.

Elemental Passage Druid Utility 22

You step sideways and disappear. Your return brings with it screaming winds and flickering flames, roaring waves and trembling earth.

Daily ✦ Elemental, Primal
Move Action **Personal**

Effect: You are removed from play until the start of your next turn. When you return to play, first roll a d4 to determine one of the additional effects below that occurs when you reappear. You then reappear in an unoccupied space within 10 squares of the space you last occupied.

1. **Air:** You can pull each creature within 3 squares of you up to 2 squares.
2. **Earth:** Each square within 2 squares of you becomes difficult terrain until the end of the encounter.
3. **Fire:** Each creature adjacent to you gains vulnerable 5 fire until the end of your next turn.
4. **Water:** You can push each creature adjacent to you up to 2 squares.

Level 25: Summon Elemental Warrior

In much the same way as the primordials manipulated raw chaos to make it assume a fixed state, you have learned to loosen the bonds that hold substance together and return it to the primordial state. In this form, you can direct it to obey your every command.

Summon Elemental Warrior Druid Attack 25

An elemental being forms at your command, its raw, violent nature only just constrained by your will.

Daily ✦ Elemental, Primal, Summoning
Minor Action **Ranged** 10

Effect: You summon an elemental warrior in an unoccupied space within range. The elemental is a type you choose: air, earth, fire, or water. The creature is an ally to you and your allies.

The elemental lacks actions of its own. Instead, you spend actions to command it mentally, choosing from the actions in the elemental's description. You must have line of effect to the elemental to command it. When you command the elemental, you and the elemental share knowledge but not senses.

When the elemental makes a check, you make the roll using your game statistics, not including any temporary bonuses or penalties.

The elemental lasts until it drops to 0 hit points, at which point you lose a healing surge (or hit points equal to your surge value if you have no surges left). Otherwise, it lasts until you dismiss it as a minor action or until the end of the encounter.

Elemental Warrior (Air) **Summoned Creature**
Large elemental humanoid (air)

HP your bloodied value; **Healing Surges** none, but you can expend a healing surge for the elemental if an effect allows it to spend one
Defenses your defenses, not including any temporary bonuses or penalties.
Speed fly 10 (hover)

ǂ Standard Action ✦ At-Will

Attack: Melee 2 (one creature); your level + 5 vs. Reflex
Hit: 2d8 + your Wisdom modifier damage, and the target is marked by the elemental until the end of your next turn. The target is immobilized and takes ongoing 10 damage (save ends both). This effect ends the moment the target is more than 2 squares away from the elemental.

Minor Action ✦ At-Will (1/round)

Effect: The elemental either walks, shifts, runs, stands up, squeezes, or crawls.

Opportunity Action ✦ At-Will

Trigger: An enemy that is marked by the elemental moves without shifting or uses an attack power that does not include the elemental as a target.
Effect: The elemental uses its standard action attack against the triggering enemy.

Elemental Warrior (Earth) **Summoned Creature**
Large elemental humanoid (earth)

HP your bloodied value; **Healing Surges** none, but you can expend a healing surge for the elemental if an effect allows it to spend one
Defenses your defenses, not including any temporary bonuses or penalties.
Speed 5, burrow 5

ǂ Standard Action ✦ At-Will

Attack: Melee 2 (one creature); your level + 5 vs. Reflex
Hit: 2d8 + your Wisdom modifier damage, and one enemy adjacent to the target takes damage equal to 10 + your Wisdom modifier. The target cannot shift and is marked by the elemental until the end of your next turn.

Minor Action ✦ At-Will

Effect: The elemental either walks, shifts, runs, stands up, squeezes, or crawls.

Opportunity Action ✦ At-Will (1/round)

Trigger: An enemy that is marked by the elemental moves without shifting or uses an attack power that does not include the elemental as a target.
Effect: The elemental uses its standard action attack against the triggering enemy.

Elemental Warrior (Fire) **Summoned Creature**
Large elemental humanoid (fire)

HP your bloodied value; **Healing Surges** none, but you can expend a healing surge for the elemental if an effect allows it to spend one

Defenses your defenses, not including any temporary bonuses or penalties.

Speed 8, fly 4 (clumsy)

ǂ Standard Action (fire) **✦ At-Will**

Attack: Melee 2 (one creature); your level + 5 vs. Reflex

Hit: 2d8 + your Wisdom modifier fire damage, and the target is marked by the elemental until the end of your next turn. The target also takes ongoing 10 fire damage (save ends). The elemental can shift 1 square.

Minor Action ✦ At-Will (1/round)

Effect: The elemental either walks, shifts, runs, stands up, squeezes, or crawls.

Opportunity Action ✦ At-Will

Trigger: An enemy that is marked by the elemental moves without shifting or uses an attack power that does not include the elemental as a target.

Effect: The elemental uses its standard action attack against the triggering enemy.

Elemental Warrior (Water) **Summoned Creature**
Large elemental humanoid (water)

HP your bloodied value; **Healing Surges** none, but you can expend a healing surge for the elemental if an effect allows it to spend one

Defenses your defenses, not including any temporary bonuses or penalties.

Speed 6, swim 6

ǂ Standard Action ✦ At-Will

Attack: Melee 2 (one creature); your level + 5 vs. Reflex

Hit: 3d8 + your Wisdom modifier damage, and the elemental pushes the target up to 2 squares and knocks it prone. The target is marked by the elemental until the end of your next turn.

Minor Action ✦ At-Will (1/round)

Effect: The elemental either walks, shifts, runs, stands up, squeezes, or crawls.

Opportunity Action ✦ At-Will

Trigger: An enemy that is marked by the elemental moves without shifting or uses an attack power that does not include the elemental as a target.

Effect: The elemental uses its standard action attack against the triggering enemy.

Master Hierophant

Prerequisite: 21st level, druid

Your fate is to peer through the veil of worlds and see reality as it truly is, to behold the wonder and splendor of creation and mold it in whatever way you desire. You have always sensed the inherent possibility in your surroundings, always sensed the energy that wells up from rocks and trees, wind and rain. At one time, you thought such power belonged to the spirit world. The more you studied, the more you realized that the spirits are only one part of a much grander story that began when the primordials merged form with substance.

This realization has helped you to harness the latent energy in all things, to call it forth, and to use it as you will. You realize that such knowledge is dangerous: Its reckless exploitation could complete the task the primordials began so long ago—that of unraveling the fabric of creation. It falls to you to husband your knowledge, to keep it safe and carry it with you until the end of your days.

As a Master Hierophant, you have perfected the blending of elemental and primal magic. One feeds into the other, and their fusion energizes a great cycle through which you can transcend your mortality and become something greater. Fire and wind, earth and water are yours to command. They serve you as you carve your name in history. As you progress up the ladder of knowledge, exposure to elemental power slowly changes you; your mortality is stripped away until you become something akin to the primordials of old.

Immortality

Your extensive use of elemental power exacts a terrible price. What you once thought was a boon born from an understanding of the world's true nature reveals itself to be a curse. Your mortal form becomes compromised as ancient forces that seek entry into the world try to use you as their vessel.

Exile and Rebirth: Realizing the risk you pose to the natural world, you withdraw from it as far as you can—deep into the Astral Sea. After ages spent sailing the shimmering sea, the elemental energy contained within you finally slips free, transforming you into the primordial power you were destined to become. In this form, raw chaos bleeds from you and surrounds you with a swirling maelstrom. In time, you divide yourself until each mood, hope, and fear becomes distinct. As new versions of you appear in this primordial substance, each claims a share of the protoplasm, shaping it into matter until a new world is born. Thus you germinate the seeds that will become a new reality born from your mortal achievements. Someday it might resemble the world you left behind, or it could be unique in the multiverse.

Level 21: Epic Insight

Your understanding about reality and its characteristics transcends mortal limits and opens your mind to new possibilities.

Benefit: You increase your Wisdom score and any other ability score by 2.

You are able to speak, read, and write Primordial fluently.

Level 24: Epic Transcendence

There was a time when your body was as vulnerable as anyone else's. Elemental power eliminates your weaknesses and girds you against age and infirmity.

Benefit: You are immune to disease.

You also stop aging. Time cannot kill you, though injury might. Unless some calamity befalls you, you retain your present age and appearance.

Finally, once per encounter as a minor action, you can speed your recovery by placing your body into a state of suspended animation. While in suspended animation, you are unconscious, have regeneration 5 while bloodied, and can make saving throws at both the start and the end of your turns. Your suspended animation ends at the end of the encounter or when you choose to end it at the end of your turn.

Level 26: Elemental Transmogrification

Your mastery over elemental power reaches a point at which you can transform yourself into an elemental creature. When you do, your flesh and possessions merge to become an enormous being of pure air, earth, fire, or water.

Level 30: Elemental Ascension

You attain perfect mastery over the elements and can call upon their power whenever you choose.

Benefit: When you use *elemental transmogrification*, choose two elemental forms and gain the benefits from both.

In addition, the first time each day you drop below 1 hit point, you regain 50 hit points.

Elemental Transmogrification — Master Hierophant Utility 26

Your body sloughs away to reveal an elemental monster of incredible power.

Daily ✦ Elemental, Polymorph, Primal
Minor Action **Personal**

Effect: You assume the form of a Huge elemental until the end of the encounter. You push any creature adjacent to you up to 2 squares to make room for your transformation.

Your equipment becomes part of your elemental form. You continue to gain the benefits of the equipment you wear and carry and can use the properties and powers of any magic items that you wear or carry.

When you assume this form, choose one of the following elements. Your choice determines the benefits you gain from this transformation.

- ✦ *Air:* Your speed drops to 0 and you gain a fly speed of 10 (hover). Whenever you are not adjacent to an enemy at the start of your turn, you become invisible until the end of your next turn or until you attack.
- ✦ *Earth:* You take a -1 penalty to speed, and you gain a burrow speed of 5. You can pass through earth and rock as though you were phasing.
- ✦ *Fire:* You gain a +4 bonus to speed and a fly speed of 6 (clumsy). Whenever you take damage from an enemy attack, each enemy adjacent to you takes 10 fire damage.
- ✦ *Water:* You gain a swim speed of 6 and are considered an aquatic creature, letting you breathe underwater and granting you a +2 bonus to attack rolls against nonaquatic creatures while in aquatic combat. Also, whenever you take damage from an enemy attack, you can slide each enemy adjacent to you 1 square.

About the Author

Robert J. Schwalb is an award-winning game designer who has contributed design to or developed nearly two hundred roleplaying game titles for the Dungeons & Dragons® game, *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay, A Song of Ice and Fire Roleplaying Game, Star Wars Roleplaying Game,* and the d20 System. Some of his more recent work for Wizards of the Coast can be found in D&D Gamma World™: *Famine in Far-Go, Dark Sun® Campaign Setting,* and *Monster Manual®* 3. Also, he's a regular contributor to both *Dragon* and *Dungeon* online. Check out his website at www.robertjschwalb.com.

Updated March 3, 2011

Winning Races

Genasi of Athas

By Robert J. Schwalb

Illustration by Francisco Rico Torres and Eric L. Williams

"Greetings, traveler. It seems our paths have crossed again. When we last spoke, I regaled you with stories of my travels, with wonders found in distant lands, and horrors born from the madness of the sorcerer-kings. Well, friend, I have not been idle. These feet have carried me farther afield, as I have no doubt you suspect. In fact, I've just returned from the Ringing Mountains pursuing rumors about the ruins of Shethakara. Alas, I never found its fabulous treasures, no thanks to Hop'tol, despot of the T'tak clan. Those halflings have the sharpest teeth! Just look at this cloak. Ah, but that's a tale for another time.

"Now that I think of it, have I ever told you about the half-elementals? The ones in the Sea of Silt? No? Well, settle in, friend. Their tale is one I suspect you will enjoy."

The reclusive half-elementals, also known as genasi, are little more than legend, and tales told by travelers who claim to have encountered them are often dismissed as outright lies. The genasi are unknown to most people inhabiting the Tyr Region, and for good reason. They make their homes on the tiny islands rising from the vast Silt Sea spreading out to the east, far from the city-states and their trade routes. The genasi have nothing but disdain for civilization, sneering at the sorcerer-kings and their despotic rule. They have no love for the mortal races, and their arrogance is equaled only by their tempestuous personalities. They are a people apart, content to struggle in the swirling dust storms and having no part in the

TM & © 2011 Wizards of the Coast LLC. All rights reserved.

plight faced by the despotic regimes that define the Tyr Region.

Or so people have believed until now. For the first time in memory, the half-elementals have begun an exodus from their hidden redoubts and are now exploring the lands they abandoned years ago. What they seek, and why they have chosen this time to venture into the realms of the sorcerer-kings, no one knows. But their emergence is unmistakable, and those who live along the shores of the Silt Sea wonder if this trickle presages a greater and more terrible flood.

GENASI IN THE LAND OF THE DARK SUN

Rules for genasi are presented in the *Forgotten Realms® Player's Guide*. Although created for Faerûn, genasi are also appropriate for the *Dark Sun® Campaign Setting*, given the primordials' influence on the world of Athas and their victory over the gods in prehistory. In addition to the elemental manifestations described here, you can also choose, with your Dungeon Master's permission, from the other elemental manifestations. Earth, fire, and wind elemental manifestations would be appropriate inclusions in the world of Athas, but storm and water are deemed lost manifestations, given the lack of suitable habitat in Athas.

New Elemental Manifestations

New elemental manifestations for genasi characters in Athas reflect the dying world's hostile desert landscape.

Embersoul

Your elemental nature is death and destruction. You are the aftermath of a volcanic eruption, the wreckage left by flame.

Benefit: You have a +1 racial bonus to Reflex and a +4 racial bonus to saving throws against ongoing fire damage. In addition, you have the *ashfall evasion* power.

Ashfall Evasion Embersoul Genasi Racial Attack

You fly apart to become a cloud of swirling ashes. The cloud obscures the vision of your enemies and burns their flesh.

Encounter ✦ Fire, Polymorph, Zone
Immediate Reaction **Close** burst 2
Trigger: You take damage from an attack.
Effect: The burst creates a zone that lasts until the start of your next turn, and you are removed from play until the zone ends. The zone is lightly obscured, and any enemy that ends its turn in the zone takes fire damage equal to your Intelligence, Wisdom, or Charisma modifier (your choice). When you return to play, you do so in an unoccupied square of your choice that was in the zone.

Magmasoul

You are the world's fiery core, the molten iron that forever burns. Your footsteps ignite the ground, and heat radiates in waves from your body.

Benefit: You have a +1 racial bonus to Fortitude. Whenever you take fire damage, your melee attacks deal 1d6 extra fire damage until the end of your next turn. In addition, you have the *flowing magma* power.

Flowing Magma Magmasoul Genasi Racial Utility

You become a creature of fire and stone, a destructive mass of magma that burns anything in your path.

Encounter ✦ Aura, Fire, Polymorph
Minor Action **Personal**
Effect: You assume a molten form until the end of your next turn. While in this form, you are slowed, you are immune to fire, and you cannot be pulled, pushed, or slid unless you choose to be. In addition, you create an aura 1 that lasts as long as the form does. Any creature that ends its turn in the aura takes fire damage equal to your Strength, Constitution, or Dexterity modifier (your choice).
Level 11: A creature that ends its turn in the aura takes 3 + Strength, Constitution, or Dexterity modifier fire damage.
Level 21: A creature that ends its turn in the aura takes 6 + Strength, Constitution, or Dexterity modifier fire damage.

Sandsoul

You are one with the desert wastes. You are the mighty dune and the terrible sandstorm, the silt swirling in the estuaries and basins in the east.

Benefit: You have a +4 racial bonus to Acrobatics checks and Athletics checks made when taking the escape action. You also have a +2 racial bonus to saving throws against effects that immobilize, restrain, or slow you. In addition, you have the *sandslide* power.

Sandslide Sandsoul Genasi Racial Utility

You transform your body from flesh and sinew into flowing sand. In this form, you can spill through the smallest gaps.

Encounter ✦ Polymorph
Minor Action **Personal**
Effect: You assume the form of living sand until the start of your next turn. While in this form, you are insubstantial, can enter enemies' spaces but not end your move there, and can squeeze through any opening large enough to permit a single grain of sand.

Sunsoul

You are the incarnation of the crimson sun. You are the unforgiving hammer in the day's sky, the burning sphere tracking across the dome of the world.

Benefit: You have a +4 racial bonus to saving throws against ongoing damage that includes fire or radiant damage. You and your equipment suffer no ill effect from ambient temperatures between -50 and 140 degrees Fahrenheit, and you are immune to sun sickness. In addition, you have the *sun flare* power.

Sun Flare Sunsoul Genasi Racial Attack

Your agony breaks your tenuous hold on the sun's power and blazes forth as painful light.

Encounter ✦ Fire, Radiant
Immediate Reaction **Close** burst 1
Trigger: An enemy hits you while you are bloodied.
Target: Each creature in the burst
Attack: Strength, Constitution, or Dexterity vs. Reflex. You gain a +2 bonus to the attack roll.
Level 11: The bonus increases to +4.
Level 21: The bonus increases to +6.
Hit: Strength, Constitution, or Dexterity modifier fire and radiant damage, and the target takes a -2 penalty to attack rolls until the end of its next turn. If the target is bloodied by this attack, it is also blinded until the end of its next turn.
Level 11: 1d6 + Strength, Constitution, or Dexterity modifier fire and radiant damage.
Level 21: 2d6 + Strength, Constitution, or Dexterity modifier fire and radiant damage.

Genasi Legends

More legend than truth is known about the half-elementals. Like other races of Athas, the genasi lost their recorded history with the rise of the sorcerer-kings. Only those tales handed down through oral tradition have survived. The genasi recount these legends empower and motivate the young and to sustain their race during the long generations of exile.

Each enclave tells its own version of the origin myth, but the central theme is the same. The genasi claim to have been created shortly after the Lords of Stone and Fire, Wind and Rain shaped the world out of chaos. With the world complete, the primordials infused their essence into raw elemental material to give it life and purpose as the first genasi.

The primordials created these offspring to serve as helpers, builders, protectors, and warriors, because they knew that their great rivals, the gods, sought to claim creation as their own and populate it with creatures in their own image. The primordials resented any interference and worked to ensure their creations would rule the world.

For eons, neither side held sway. The world existed in balance, and Athas enjoyed an era of prosperity dimly remembered as the Green Age. But toward the end of that time, war broke out between the primordials and the gods. The primordials emerged from the Elemental Chaos to destroy the gods of Athas and, with the aid of their chosen people, scattered their enemies' immortal servants to the farthest reaches of the cosmos.

That terrible conflict taxed the primordials sorely, and they withdrew into a deep slumber that lasts to this day. They had confidence that their children would protect the primordials' creation from outside meddling, but this confidence was an error. The genasi, a widespread and varied people, inherited their makers' fractious nature, and there was no peace among them. Each tribe or faction attempted to assert dominance over the other. While the genasi fought among themselves, the fecund mortal races grew and thrived until their numbers dwarfed those of the genasi, and their resentment over the genasi's sense of entitlement sparked into war. Outnumbered and threatened by terrible magic, the genasi fled to the world's farthest corners and left the world to the upstarts.

The genasi watched from their hidden redoubts while the victorious races grew mighty, but the genasi were not idle. They studied many forms of magic to enhance their already potent abilities. The half-elementals were horrified when the Green Age gave way to the bloody Red Age, when conquerors mounted terrible genocidal campaigns to purge the world of people they despised. The genasi were shaken by the defiling magic that swept across the once-verdant paradise, but they took no part in the wars. Instead, they waited for their enemies to destroy themselves.

In the end, the sorcerer-kings emerged unchallenged and claimed the world as their prize, condemning all other peoples to suffering and toil under their rule. The genasi believe this was a just punishment for those who drove them nearly to extinction. Yet a few genasi mourned the world's slow death and the ruination of the elemental spirits they had served for so long. Their anger and despair were matched, however, by an equal fear of the dread sorcerer-kings that prevailed, and in particular, the Dragon of Tyr, which had caused so much of the world's destruction. So the genasi remained hidden and apart, unwilling to save the world that had been bequeathed to them in the dim past.

Physical Qualities

The genasi are often called half-elementals because of their humanlike forms. They are the same size and shape as humans, though they are slightly bulkier, and thus they are mistaken for having human ancestry. Their elemental nature, however, is unmistakable, and the power of the Elemental Chaos bleeds from them through their tempestuous personalities and the manifestations in their flesh.

The genasi in Athas today are descended from ancestors considered "purer" in their manifestations. Stories abound in genasi communities of those predecessors manifesting the elements of air, fire, earth, and water. Mingled bloodlines combined with the ever-changing world have resulted in new elemental manifestations. Although one can still find earth genasi and fire genasi, the most common manifestations among Athasian genasi are ember, magma, sun, and sand.

Elemental manifestations are what give genasi their distinctive appearance. Instead of hair, all genasi possess a corona corresponding to their elemental heritage. Examples include wreaths of smoke, flames, or crystalline growths.

Genasi also display glowing patterns in their skin, appearing similar to lines and whorls. Soft light in a color associated with a genasi's elemental manifestation shines from his or her patterns. Genasi from the same tribe have the same color and shape of pattern, which is a useful identifier of origin. Facial patterns are unique to each individual.

Short of dying by accident or in combat, a genasi can expect to live as long as a human; 100 years is considered extreme old age.

Here are broad descriptions of common manifestations of genasi on Athas:

Ember: You have gray-black skin adorned with black fissures and patterns. Your eyes are jet. Smoke and ash swirl about your head, building in intensity when you call upon elemental power.

Magma: Bright red patterns shine out from your coal-black skin. Your eyes shine with scarlet light, and darkness floats across their surface, as in a lava flow. Heat radiates from you.

Sand: You bear the strongest resemblance to humans among the genasi. You have tan skin traced with a faint white pattern. Your eyes are pure white.

Sun: A crimson corona surrounds your head. The same light is found in your eyes and in the patterns adorning your golden skin.

Attitudes and Beliefs

The genasi have remained apart from other peoples because they lost so much in the years leading up to the Red Age. They trust few who are not genasi, and they suspect everyone they meet of harboring the worst intentions.

Genasi might be wary of other races, but they have a special hatred for sorcerer-kings and defilers, whom they hold responsible for the devastation of the world and the damage dealt to the elemental spirits to which the genasi are pledged. The genasi recall well the genocidal struggles of the Red Age and their own reluctance to intervene against the sorcerer-kings. Their hatred is tempered by pragmatism. The genasi know they lack the numbers and strength to mount a successful crusade against their ancient foes. But Kalak's recent death has prompted the genasi to leave their hidden redoubts, because his end suggests that the sorcerer-kings and their reigns might not be as eternal as they once seemed.

Aside from their concerns about the world, the genasi also must come to terms with their inner conflict. Their elemental heritage battles with their natural form and struggles to break free. This conflict can manifest in wild, impulsive, and sometimes destructive behavior. Most genasi are able to suppress their emotions and thus come off as detached or disinterested in what goes on around them. Those genasi who successfully navigate the narrow road between total self-denial and wild abandon can live constructive lives, but frustration, disappointment, and grief constantly chip away at their self-control. Genasi are always at risk of losing their grip and becoming as destructive as the elemental forces they embody.

Genasi Communities

When the genasi fled into self-imposed exile, they retreated to the most remote, desolate places on Athas. Their physical qualities suited them to these hostile environments. Most genasi settlements are isolated enclaves, hidden by natural features to prevent their accidental discovery by explorers. This effort to remain hidden, however, proved fruitless for the refugees who settled in and around the Tyr Region, because their enemies soon discovered them and stamped them out. All that remains of these settlements are ruined dwellings and fortifications.

Genasi settlements hidden in the Sea of Silt managed to escape destruction. The shifting surface of the Sea of Silt is speckled with rocky islands that rise above the suffocating dust and the billowing clouds to reach toward the dim sun overhead. Most of these protrusions are barren and little more than a few hundred square feet in area, but there are larger islands that are able to sustain modest populations of folk who are willing to risk tangling with the giants

that wade through the shallows and the raiders who sail the dust on skiffs searching for plunder.

Most such islands are home to dwarven clans, raiding bands, and liberated slaves. A few hold trading outposts, and others are home to druids who enrich their adopted land with primal energy. Beyond these scattered isles are greater and more deadly places where not even the desperate would settle, because of the scarce resources and the unknown, undefined dangers that are believed to lie farther east. Here is where the genasi make their homes.

Secrecy is the key to survival in these distant reaches. Genasi conceal their communities among natural landscape features. Most are hidden in the interior of their islands, behind towering cliffs or dense boulder fields. Because their numbers are so few, genasi employ indigenous creatures for protection. For example, the enclaves in the Mountains of the Sun rely on the hejkins and spiders that infest the islands to deter explorers. Likewise, the genasi living on Dhuurghaz depend on an age-old alliance with the beast giants of the Khal-Ish-Thaas tribe.

Rumors speak of genasi settlements beyond the Great Ash Storm in the east, in the Valley of Dust and Fire, where the terrible Dragon of Tyr makes its lair. The half-elementals in this region are slaves who are cruelly worked to death in the mines and fields or eaten to sate the monster's appetite.

Although genasi can live their entire lives without crossing paths with other races, the world is not so large that they can completely escape the events unfolding in the Tyr Region. Word of Kalak's death has reached their ears from raiders and travelers who stumbled upon their enclaves. With each telling, the truth gradually gains traction over their doubts, so that many genasi now believe that the time for their return is at hand. A few have begun the long journey back to civilization to learn the true state of the world and to help free it from the devastation wrought by the hated sorcerer-kings.

Genasi Backgrounds

A life spent on civilization's fringes brings with it unique challenges to which the genasi are eminently suited. A genasi in the Seven Cities is a loner, a rare traveler who has left behind clan and homeland. Finding a home in a new and hostile world is a struggle a genasi faces until the end of his or her days.

Balance-Seeker: You have communed with the spirits, walked the lands for miles around, and witnessed the ravages done to your world. You can draw only one conclusion from your exploration: The world is getting worse. If Athas can be saved, someone must stand against the defilers and the sorcerer-kings to restore the balance and heal this injured world. That person is you.

Associated Skills: Arcana, Nature

Incite a Revolt (heroic tier quest): The first step in breaking the sorcerer-kings' hold on the world is to rally the people to your cause. It is too dangerous to speak out against the sorcerer-kings, so you might escalate tensions by pushing the templars to take more draconian measures to keep the common folk in line. People can take only so much abuse before they rise up against their tormentors.

Locate a Green Age Relic (paragon tier quest): You suspect that the damage done to the world could be corrected by reclaiming the magic from the Green Age. You might scour old ruins, explore haunted tunnels, or venture beyond the Tyr Region to locate the treasure you seek.

Awaken a Primordial (epic tier quest): The primordials have slumbered since defeating the Tyrants of the Starry Void. If you could rouse a primordial and reveal what has been done to the world, you might gain a powerful ally against the sorcerer-kings.

Half-Elemental Refugee: Your Silt Sea enclave stood hidden for generations, safe from storm and raid. It was impervious to ancient enemies and monsters beyond counting, but your people grew complacent. When a true threat to their survival appeared, they were unprepared. You managed to escape the enclave and have fled the Silt Sea for safer lands. What wiped out your people? Were there other survivors? Do you seek a new home? Or was one tragic end enough, and now it's time for you to claim your destiny?

Associated Skills: Perception, Stealth.

Find the Survivors (heroic tier quest): Others must have survived the attack that destroyed your community. If you would find them, you must remain watchful for signs and listen for rumors about your kind. Aside from reuniting with lost kin, you might also learn about the nature of the enemy that attacked you.

Unite the Genasi (paragon tier quest): While searching for your scattered people, you could come across other enclaves. They might welcome you, but it should be clear they intend to remain hidden. Your people are at risk of annihilation if they remain isolated from each other, so it falls to you to draw them out and unite them behind a common cause.

Vengeance Is Yours (epic tier quest): Once you manage to unite your genasi cousins and those other survivors from your enclave, you are ready to exact vengeance against the enemy that drove you away and launched your adventuring career.

Reclaimed Birthright: You are fascinated by the lorekeepers' stories, and the more you learned, the more you felt your destiny beckon. You believe that the world belongs to you and your people, not the lesser races that wrested its control from you. The abuses done to the land are proof enough that those races have been inept rulers and poor stewards. So you have set out to reclaim your birthright and to forge a new land where your people can take their rightful place as masters of the world.

Associated Skills: History, Intimidate.

Raise an Army (heroic tier quest): The genasi are neither numerous nor strong enough to challenge the rule of the sorcerer-kings alone, so you must recruit warriors from the civilized lands. You might unite the slave tribes of the wastes or take command of the merchant houses to gain their resources. Your efforts could win you enemies, but it also attracts followers to your cause.

Conquer a City-State (paragon tier quest): Conquering a city-state is no easy task even if you're at the head of a powerful army. You must find a way to make allies out of the people you would conquer and convince them to throw in their lot with you against the common enemy.

Heal the Land (epic tier quest): Your successes against the sorcerer-kings might make them think twice about tangling with you, but even if you manage to secure your rule, the world is so damaged that your successes may not amount to much. The only hope for the future is to repair the damage done. You might achieve this by using ancient magic, by defeating the Dragon of Tyr, or by enlisting the primordials to lend their power to repairing the world.

Roleplaying a Genasi

When creating a genasi character, here are a few points to consider:

Your nature is conflicted. You are a contradiction. You are chaos bound by order, raw energy in humanoid form. A part of you wants to surrender to this chaos, to go and do as you please, consequences be damned. Some genasi struggle to control what they see as a dark side. They are overly reserved and controlled, visibly struggling to contain their anger when insulted or abused. Others have little restraint and fly off the handle with the slightest provocation.

Your manifestation defines you. Your elemental nature, whether or not you have found peace with it, informs your personality. Ember genasi are subdued and pessimistic; sun genasi can be intense, outspoken, and aggressive; and sand genasi are mercurial and free-spirited. How does your elemental nature manifest?

You hate defilers. The genasi believe the world was given to them to rule as they saw fit. They see their role being usurped by unworthy rulers who have spent the ages exploiting Athas's resources and turning the world into a dead husk. The ones most responsible are the reckless defilers who have wrought untold devastation from which the world might never recover. Genasi have little tolerance for defiling magic and might extend their scorn to anyone who uses arcane energy.

You are an outsider. Genasi are unknown to the people of the Tyr Region. Although the wastes spawn all manner of strange creatures and peoples, to say nothing of the alterations found in the common folk inhabiting the city-states, your curious appearance might evoke strange looks and

even hostility. Do you hide your nature, masking it beneath a hooded cloak or other disguise? Or do you display your appearance proudly?

Racial Paragon Path: Desert's Voice

"There are voices in the land. I can hear their cries in the wind and in the shifting dunes. They call to me, begging for vengeance. Have I any choice but to answer?"

Prerequisite: Genasi

Your purpose has become clear. You see it in the desolation around you, in the ruins scattered across the countryside, in every agonized face you behold. The wind carries it with the stench of carrion, smoke, and fire. The ashes left by defilers, the bone fields that mark the places where tribes, cities or entire races were wiped out—these signs have revealed to you your reason for being: to repair the world. Perhaps the pull you feel is in your head, a delusion born from desperation. Do you dare ignore it? If the despoilers aren't stopped, what future does this world have? So you take upon yourself a dread task to undo the damage done to this world.

Choosing a Racial Paragon Path: When you reach 11th level, you can choose a racial paragon path instead of another paragon path. The only prerequisite is that you must be a character of the appropriate race.

Level 11: Athasian Totem

You construct a special totem to serve as a focus and inspiration for your crusade. The item's presence is both a comfort and an assurance that you cannot fail.

Benefit: You gain proficiency with the totem as an implement. In addition, after you score a critical hit with an implement attack using a totem, you can shift 1 square as a free action.

Level 11: Desert Manifestation

Your kinship with the wastelands awakens your elemental nature, making it easier for you to call upon your natural talents and to unlock new abilities you never knew you had.

Benefit: Choose a genasi racial power that you do not already possess. The power must be associated with the ember, magma, sand, or sun manifestation. You gain this power.

Level 11: Wasteland Action

When your need is greatest, the world answers. Your extra effort summons up shrieking winds to hammer your enemies.

Benefit: When you spend an action point to make an extra attack, each enemy within 3 squares of you is deafened until the end of your next turn. In addition, you can slide each enemy within 3 squares of you 1 square before making the attack.

Level 11: Wrath of the Ravaged

The world's broken and tattered spirit dances around you, waiting for your permission to unleash its wrath on the creatures it hates.

Benefit: You gain the *wrath of the ravaged* power.

Wrath of the Ravaged — Desert's Voice Attack 11

You release the vengeful spirits in punishing wind, abrading sand, boiling rock, and suffocating ash.

Encounter ✦ Implement, Primal
Standard Action **Close** blast 5
Target: Each creature in the blast
Attack: Strength, Constitution, or Intelligence vs. Fortitude
Hit: 2d6 + Strength, Constitution, or Intelligence modifier damage. You push the target up to 5 squares, and it takes a -2 penalty to attack rolls until the end of your next turn.

Level 12: Elemental Resurgence

The wastes are rich with elemental energy. You can call upon it to give you new strength and resolve.

Benefit: You gain the *elemental resurgence* power.

Elemental Resurgence — Desert's Voice Utility 12

Elemental energy responds to your agony and floods into you in a sudden rush of power.

Daily ✦ Primal
Minor Action **Personal**
Requirement: You must be bloodied.
Effect: You gain 5 temporary hit points, and you regain the use of one genasi racial encounter power that you have already used during this encounter.
Level 21: You gain 10 temporary hit points.

Level 16: Elemental Adept

Your elemental manifestation grows in intensity, building inside you and letting you achieve greater results when you call on its power.

Benefit: You gain a benefit associated with each genasi racial power you possess.

Ashfall Evasion: The power becomes a close burst 3.

Earthshock: Creatures hit by this power cannot stand up until the end of your next turn.

Firepulse: On a hit, each enemy adjacent to the target takes fire damage equal to your Strength, Constitution, or Dexterity modifier.

Flowing Magma: This power no longer slows you.

Sandslide: While in the form of living sand, you are also phasing.

Sun Flare: Each target hit by this power is blinded until the end of its next turn, even if it was not bloodied by the attack.

Windwalker: This power becomes an at-will power for you.

Level 20: Cataclysm

The desert's power is yours to command. When you use *cataclysm*, vengeful spirits boil out from the land, trailing elemental energy that rips your enemies to pieces.

Benefit: You gain the *cataclysm* power.

Cataclysm Desert's Voice Attack 20

The spirits answer your cry and they surge from the broken landscape to bring elemental death to your foes.

Daily ✦ Primal, Zone
Minor Action **Area** burst 2 within 20 squares
Effect: The burst creates a zone that lasts until the end of your next turn. The zone is difficult terrain and lightly obscured. Any creature that ends its turn in the zone takes 5 damage. While the zone remains, you can use the secondary power at will.
Sustain Minor: The zone persists until the end of your next turn.

Secondary Power (Implement, Primal)
Standard Action **Area** burst 2 centered on the zone's origin square
Target: Each creature in the burst
Attack: Strength, Constitution, or Intelligence vs. Fortitude
Hit: 2d8 + Strength, Constitution, or Intelligence modifier damage. In addition, the target is slowed and takes ongoing 10 damage (save ends both).

New Genasi Feats

Genasi adventurers learn new ways to harness their elemental heritage and coax more power from it.

Flow Like Sand

When you call upon your elemental manifestation, your sandy form moves quickly out of reach of enemies or into a more advantageous location.

Prerequisite: Genasi, sandsoul elemental manifestation

Benefit: Immediately after you use *sandslide*, you can shift up to your speed as a free action.

Lingering Ashes

When you call on your elemental manifestation, the swirling ashes linger in the air to mask you from view.

Prerequisite: Genasi, embersoul elemental manifestation

Benefit: When you return to play after using *ashfall evasion*, you gain partial concealment until the end of your next turn.

Magma Eruptions

The heat generated by your elemental manifestation leaches strength from your enemies.

Prerequisite: Genasi, magmasoul elemental manifestation

Benefit: Any creature damaged by the aura created by your *flowing magma* power is also weakened until the end of its next turn.

Stare at the Sun

When you call upon your elemental manifestation, you shine with blinding light.

Prerequisite: Genasi, sunsoul elemental manifestation

Benefit: When you use *sun flare*, you gain a +2 bonus to all defenses against melee and ranged attacks until the end of the triggering enemy's next turn.

About the Author

Robert J. Schwalb is an award-winning game designer who has contributed design to or developed nearly two hundred roleplaying game titles for the Dungeons & Dragons® game, *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay*, *A Song of Ice and Fire Roleplaying Game*, *Star Wars Roleplaying Game*, and the d20 System. Some of his more recent work for Wizards of the Coast can be found in D&D Gamma World®: *Famine in Far-Go*, Dark Sun® *Campaign Setting*, and *Monster Manual*® 3. Also, he's a regular contributor to both *Dragon* and *Dungeon* magazines. For more information about the author, be sure to check out his website at www.robertjschwalb.com.

Updated: March 4, 2011

Unearthed Arcana

Fight or Flight

Expanding Your Options for Ending an Encounter

By Richard Baker

Illustration by Julie Dillon

DM: *Okay, the ogre hits you . . . looks like 23 damage to Keroth! Oh, and you're dazed, too.*

Bob (Keroth): *Ow! I'm bloodied. Guys, I don't think we can win this one. Are we running or not?*

Doug (Emand): *I'm down to my last healing surge.*

Tim (Jandar): *No way! We can take 'em.*

DM: *Doug, it's Emand's go. What are you doing to do?*

Doug (Emand): *Umm, are we running? Umm, I shift, and then I move to the door.*

DM: *The ogre laughs. "Puny coward!" he shouts at Emand. Tim, your go.*

Tim (Jandar): *I'm going to move over to the ogre and attack him! Does a 19 hit him?*

DM: *Sorry, just missed.*

Bob (Keroth): *Dude, what are you doing? Head for the door, we're running!*

Tim (Jandar): *No, you go ahead, I'll hold 'em for a round and cover you!*

DM: *You're up, Keroth.*

Bob (Keroth): *Shoot. I can't leave while you're here. I guess I attack.*

Doug (Emand): *Are we running or not? Why am I standing by the door, guys?*

Ever see something like this play out at your game table? Sooner or later, every party hits an encounter from which the characters probably should flee, but even experienced players have a hard time breaking off a battle in most Dungeons & Dragons® games. Sometimes it's a matter of poor play or bad coordination. One or two players at the table aren't ready to stop fighting when other party members want to pull back. In most cases the culprit is the initiative system. The initiative system is not a problem when the characters defeat the monsters, but every now and then the heroes are trapped and destroyed by the initiative cycle.

TM & © 2011 Wizards of the Coast LLC. All rights reserved.

Cycling initiative does many things well. It's fast, it's simple, and it's absolutely fair, in that no one can act twice before someone else acts once. However, successfully retreating from a pitched battle requires all the players to act in concert. Veteran players might have the discipline and awareness to combine their actions—for example, "Everybody ready an action or delay so that we all flee on Joe's turn!"—but these tactics are difficult to employ at the table, since some players invariably try to change the plan in mid-round, or the monsters' actions make it impossible for a delaying character to do what he or she is waiting to do. After all, routine encounters sometimes turn extremely dangerous when a few critical hits fall the wrong way, or a character fails a crucial saving throw. Those strokes of bad luck shouldn't lock parties into a TPK so easily.

Retreats aren't the only course of action discouraged by the initiative system. Demands for surrender or offers of parlay can come up short. One player attempts to interrupt the battle by having his or her character make an offer to talk, but another player whose character happens to act before the monsters do chooses not to delay or ready, and instead continues to attack. Most monsters naturally choose to keep fighting. Character A's offer to parlay doesn't seem sincere when Character B continues to pile on the damage.

Not seeing parlay and other options brought into play is a shame, because Dungeons & Dragons is a bigger, better game when players can entertain a full range of options. "Roll for initiative" doesn't need to be just another way of saying, "Get ready for a fight to the death." Sometimes it's better to capture the spy, allowing him to surrender so that he can save his own neck. Better options for running away mean that the Dungeon Master can stock adventures with the occasional overwhelmingly powerful monster, giving players motivation to have their characters explore other ways to progress through adventures. Parlays or surrenders give monsters a chance to offer vital clues when hard-pressed . . . or for characters to ransom their lives when the situation looks hopeless. Even when the players are committed to having their characters fight their way through something, better options for breaking off the fighting mean that it's possible to try out more hit-and-run attacks, wearing down a tough encounter with clever skirmishing rather than committing to a do-or-die assault.

With all the above in mind, this article presents a few simple rule variants to help characters—and monsters—break out of combat once it has started. Many fights should still go down to the last character (or monster) standing, but some situations call for alternatives beyond victory or death.

Encounter Status Check

We'll begin by making an important modification to the combat sequence: We add an encounter status check at the end of each round. The encounter status check takes place after each combatant has had his or her turn in the current round, and before the next round begins, as shown below:

1. **Determine surprise.** The DM determines whether anyone involved in the combat encounter is surprised.
2. **Establish positions.** The DM decides where the creatures are positioned.
3. **Roll initiative.** Everyone involved in a combat encounter rolls initiative.
4. **Take surprise round actions.** If any creatures gained a surprise round, they act in initiative order, each taking a single action. The surprise round then ends, and the first regular round of combat begins.
5. **Take turns.** In initiative order, every combatant takes a turn. When everyone has had a turn, the round ends.
6. **Encounter status check.** After each combatant has a turn, determine whether either side interrupts the encounter by fleeing, offering to parlay, surrendering, or using another method of breaking out of combat.
7. **Begin the next round.** If the encounter continues, begin the next round with whoever has the highest initiative.
8. **End the encounter.** Repeat steps 5, 6, and 7 until one side successfully interrupts the encounter or stops fighting (for example, because all the monsters are unconscious or dead).

Interrupting the Encounter

During the encounter status check, the Dungeon Master determines if the monsters attempt to interrupt the encounter by fleeing, surrendering, offering to parlay, or taking another action that could end the fighting, such as triggering a sliding wall that suddenly divides the characters from their enemies. The players decide as a group whether to interrupt the encounter. In general, characters who choose to keep fighting override characters who are in favor of seeking a break in the action—if one hero offers a parley but another hero looks like he or she plans to keep attacking, it's a mixed message at best, and the fight continues.

After one side decides to interrupt the action, the other side responds. The responding side might allow a break in the action, or ignore the interruption and keep fighting. The exact nature of the interruption and the response varies with the circumstances.

Interruption	Response	Result
Attempt to flee	Allowed	Combat ends; the fleeing side escapes
	Pursued	The encounter is now a chase scene
Offer to parlay	Accepted	Combat ends; the encounter is now an interaction encounter
	Ignored	Combat continues
Surrender demand	Accepted	Combat ends; the encounter is over
	Refused	Combat continues

A Dungeon Master's discretion and the rule of common sense prevail. For example, if any of the characters are grabbed, immobilized, or restrained, they can't attempt to flee until they get out of whatever's keeping them in place. Of course, the rest of the party could choose to abandon a trapped or restrained character to his or her fate and retreat without that individual (a coldblooded decision, but sometimes necessary). Similarly, a party trapped in a room without exits—for example, by a portcullis that dropped across the doorway behind the group—has no place to flee and can't attempt to retreat. Characters entangled in melee might have to survive opportunity attacks from their foes as they break off, and characters completely surrounded by their foes might not be able to retreat.

Although any creature can flee a fight and stands a good chance of getting away even if its enemies don't want to let it go, offers of parlay or surrender require cooperation from the other side. If the monsters don't want to talk, the heroes can't make them accept a parlay. Likewise, if the characters aren't in the mood to take prisoners, they're under no compulsion to accept their enemies' surrender. The players naturally determine whether their characters are willing to offer or listen to any sort of truce in the middle of a battle. The Dungeon Master makes the same determination for the monsters, based on what he or she knows about the monsters' motivations and morale. Poorly paid mercenaries are a lot more likely to give up or allow themselves to be bought off with a bribe than to fight to the death; fanatical cultists might refuse even the most generous offers to surrender.

Nonintelligent creatures might often choose to retreat once they've been hurt. Many predators live by bringing down their targets quickly; if the initial pounce or rush fails to overwhelm the prey, instinct may tell the predator to look elsewhere for its food rather than engaging in a prolonged battle. Beasts don't have any way to offer or respond to a parlay, but they might respond to a pause in battle, warily circling or pacing while watching a hero who isn't pressing an attack. Clever heroes might use such a respite to cautiously edge around a beast and continue on their way, especially if they distract it with food or unsettle it with threatening behavior.

Here's a short example of how this give-and-take could play at the table.

DM: *That's the end of the round. The kobolds aren't running. Do you guys continue?*
Tim (Jandar): *Heck, no! We got this.*
Bob (Keroth): *Maybe the kobolds are ready to throw in the towel. What do you guys think?*
Doug (Emand): *Are we talking now?*
Tim (Jandar): *Eh, okay, but if they say no I get to kill 'em!*
Bob (Keroth): *All right, then. I tell the kobolds to surrender if they want to live!*
DM: *Okay . . . (He thinks it over, and decides the kobolds are pretty cowardly and don't want to fight to the death.) The kobolds look at each other, and then one of them hisses, "Yesss, we surrender!" Okay, looks like that's it for the fighting. The kobolds surrender if you let them. Now what do you do?*

Fleeing and Pursuit

The most common interruption in a combat occurs when one side or the other decides to run. A band of weak, cowardly monsters such as kobolds or goblins might scatter when their chieftain is killed, or adventurers might decide to retreat from a monster that's too tough for them to beat. As they say, he who fights and runs away lives to fight another day. Running away isn't always an act of cowardice. No dishonor comes from giving up an assault that can't succeed, moving out of the killing ground in a well-staged ambush, or falling back to a more defensible spot.

When one side in a fight decides to break off, enemies have the choice to pursue or to let the group go. Many monsters and villains are bloodthirsty sorts who eagerly chase after beaten foes. However, choosing to pursue isn't always a given. A hungry predator with a kill to devour won't chase fleeing adventurers far when its next meal is already waiting for it. Territorial monsters might be content with driving away intruders, and disciplined monsters guarding a specific spot might be reluctant to abandon their posts. Intelligent monsters might suspect a ruse or an ambush, and thus allow beaten enemies to retreat rather than chase them into unknown ground. Greedy monsters might stop to gather up gold or food dropped by their fleeing enemies, giving the quarry time to escape. The Dungeon Master decides whether monsters give chase or not; the players make the same choice for their characters when it's the monsters that run.

Fleeing from the scene of a battle doesn't end that encounter if enemies pursue. The encounter continues until it's resolved through combat or all pursuers give up the chase.

Breaking Off

The first and most dangerous step in retreating is withdrawing from the immediate fighting. Breaking off is a group skill check that is made during the encounter status check.

The description that follows assumes that the adventurers are breaking off combat and being pursued by monsters or nonplayer characters. The procedure is identical when creatures under the DM's control try to withdraw, except the DM decides which skill or ability to check for each creature.

Key Skills: The most likely skills to apply are Athletics and Stealth, but they're not the only possibilities. You decide which skill your character will use, and you must explain to the Dungeon Master how it applies. If the DM agrees, then you can use that skill; if not, then you need to come up with an alternative. For example, you could try Bluff (to cause your enemy to look somewhere else for a moment while you slip away), Intimidate (to make the enemy adopt a defensive stance long enough for you to break off), or Acrobatics (to somersault backward over a table while scattering stools and platters of food in your opponent's path). Different characters can use different skills.

DC: The level of this check matches the level of the encounter. Whether a check uses an easy, moderate, or hard DC depends on the checking character's proximity to the enemy. Unlike most group checks, the DC of this check can vary between characters depending on their individual circumstances.

- ✦ Adjacent to an enemy: hard DC
- ✦ An enemy could reach your position with one move: moderate DC
- ✦ Farther than one move from all enemies: easy DC

SOME RAN, SOME DIDN'T

A group of monsters or a band of adventurers could split up in a retreat situation. Some might run while others remain behind, either because the DM decided it was impossible for those others to escape or because they're standing their ground to guard the retreat of their allies. If someone who is still a threat to the enemy (not unconscious, restrained, or otherwise incapable of fighting back) stayed behind, then no pursuit is possible. A single stout adventurer might keep the enemy busy long enough for her comrades to make their escape—a heroic end indeed!

When a group splits this way, creatures that broke off are removed from the map and the battle is continued to its conclusion. Then the chases between fleeing and pursuing groups are resolved.

The DM needs to consider the situation and decide whether the force that stayed behind can hold off the enemy. A lone, 3rd-level gnome warlock is unlikely to hold up against three adult black dragons, and a single kobold minion can't do much to slow down a party of 8th-level heroes bent on running down an evil high priest. In cases like those, the DM can allow potential pursuers to make the same group skill check as the side that fled. Success indicates that the rearguard action failed; the characters or creatures that stayed behind rejoin the fleeing group, and the chase is on.

A more complicated alternative is to forego the group skill check and have each creature make its own, individual skill check. In that case, enemies that succeed on their skill checks join the chase, while those that failed the check stay behind to fight the rearguard.

The DM can modify DCs to match the situation. A character who can fly or teleport ought to qualify for an easier DC unless the enemies also have the ability to fly or teleport. A character who is blinded or dazed, or who must cross a significant stretch of difficult terrain, must use a harder DC.

Automatic Success and Failure on Skill Checks: The situation can result in automatic success or failure for some characters. Being slowed, grabbed, stunned, or immobilized is grounds for earning an automatic failure on your skill check. Being invisible or at least 10 squares from all enemies can qualify you for automatic success. You need to make your case to the DM, who has the final say. The DM might also rule that certain conditions, such as being petrified, restrained, or unconscious, automatically prevent a character from escaping. If the group runs, that character must be left behind. Such characters don't count as failures on the group skill check. Only characters who have a chance to escape need to make checks.

Success and Failure on the Group Check: If at least half of the characters' individual skill checks succeed, then the whole group breaks away from the enemy. If more than half of the characters fail their skill checks, then the escape attempt fails and play proceeds to the next round.

Pursuit: After all retreating creatures are removed from the scene of the fight, their enemies could pursue. If they don't give chase, then the encounter is over and those who ran can regroup somewhere. If the enemy does pursue, then the encounter switches to a chase challenge.

The Chase Challenge

Characters or monsters that are pursued as they run from a fight are in for a chase scene. The fleeing group tries to outdistance or lose their pursuers, while the pursuing group tries to bring their foes to bay again.

A chase challenge is resolved in the following sequence.

- The retreating side leaves the encounter area. It might break up into multiple retreating groups.
- The nonretreating side decides whether to pursue. If it doesn't pursue, the encounter ends. If it does pursue, it might break into multiple pursuing groups.
- Each fleeing group moves twice the speed of the slowest creature in the group. Make note of the direction of flight—a group fleeing through an unknown dungeon must choose which way to go and could run into more trouble (or lead pursuers into an ambush).
- If the characters are in a fleeing group, they attempt a group retreat check to get away.
- If the characters are in a pursuing group, they attempt a group pursuit check to catch their fleeing foes.
- Resolve retreat and pursuit checks (see "Retreat and Pursuit Checks" below).
- If all characters in a group succeed, they escape (retreat) or catch their foes (pursuit).
- If all characters in a group fail, they are caught (retreat) or their foes escape (pursuit).
- If half or more the characters in the group succeed, they gain 1 chase success.
- If less than half the characters succeed, they lose 1 chase success.

SPLITTING UP DURING A CHASE

Although it's not recommended, fleeing creatures can split up in the hope of dividing their pursuers. Monsters care a lot more about self-preservation than about safeguarding the group, so they are likely to break into multiple groups when fleeing from an enemy if the opportunity arises. Characters who are chasing monsters can choose to pursue one group, or to split into smaller groups and try to catch all the monsters. Any group that isn't pursued is out of the encounter. If a group splits and both parts of it are pursued, you can have more than one chase challenge to resolve.

- The characters win the chase when they accumulate 3 chase successes (escaping if they're fleeing, or catching up if they're pursuing). They lose when they drop to fewer than 0 chase successes.
- If the chase continues, return to step 3 and repeat until the fleeing group escapes, the pursuing group catches them, or the pursuers give up the chase.

Pursuit and Retreat Checks

A chase challenge is resolved by making pursuit checks or retreat checks, as noted in the sequence. Only player characters make these checks. Retreat checks are made if characters are fleeing from the enemy, and pursuit checks are made if characters are pursuing the enemy.

Key Skills: Acrobatics, Athletics, or Endurance. Each player chooses which skill to check; different players can choose different skills.

DC: Easy, medium, or hard. Compare the speeds of the slowest creatures in the fleeing group and the pursuing group.

Easy: The slowest character is as fast as or faster than the slowest monster.

Medium: The slowest character has a speed 1 or 2 lower than that of the slowest monster.

Hard: The slowest character has a speed 3 or more lower than that of the slowest monster.

Success: If at least half the characters succeed, the group skill check is a success.

Resuming a Fight

If the pursuers catch up to the fleeing group, the encounter switches back to a combat in whatever area the fleeing group is in when it's caught. Monsters and characters reroll initiative, but this is not the start of a new encounter. Encounter powers that were used earlier are still expended, and effects that have a duration of "until the end of the encounter" are still in effect. Neither side gains the benefit of a short rest before the fighting resumes.

HIT AND RUN

With a little care, adventurers can use hit-and-run tactics by attacking for a round or two, then breaking off and retreating to rest up. However, if they run away, rest up for a few minutes, and come back, remember that the monsters might rest up, too. All monsters have up to three healing surges per day, so every time the adventurers take a short rest, the monsters can take one too, and heal 25 percent of their normal hit point total for each healing surge they spend.

Parlay and Surrender

Once the threat that a band of adventurers poses becomes clear to their foes, only the most fanatical creatures wouldn't at least pause to listen if the heroes made an interesting offer—or seek terms if it looks as if death is at hand.

Parlays are useful when both sides are closely matched in strength, so it's apparent that fighting to the death could cost the winning side more than it would care to pay. Adventurers might decide after a few tough rounds to see if a group of monsters can be bribed or persuaded to let them pass. A powerful monster might come to view the heroes as potentially useful pawns and offer them a chance to attack one of its rivals. Weak monsters bullied or enslaved by more powerful monsters could decide that they have no interest in dying for their hated masters, and offer to call it a day if they believe the heroes won't kill them all. Heroes might find themselves battling a monster they don't want to kill, such as a good-aligned guardian protecting a sacred shrine. Negotiating might be the only way to achieve their goal without getting blood on their hands.

Surrender is a little less common in adventuring situations. If faced with a powerful band of heroes, monsters would rather run away than give up. After all, throwing yourself on your opponent's mercy is a lethal mistake if it turns out your foe has none. Only when it's clear that they have no realistic hope of getting away do most monsters and villains think of surrendering. Surrenders frequently begin with negotiation of terms, but in truly desperate circumstances, one can throw down one's arms and hope for the best.

Although surrender is highly distasteful, it doesn't have to be a death sentence. Traditions of ransom and parole are respected in many cultures throughout the Dungeons & Dragons world. For example, if the heroes defeat an important lieutenant to an evil overlord, their enemy might offer to purchase his underling's freedom with a chest full of treasure. Or, a villain with important political connections might be too well connected to kill out of hand, and the heroes might be compelled by circumstances to let her go. Likewise, if the heroes fall into the hands of an orc war chief, their patrons or allies might arrange their release by paying tribute to the chieftain. Needless to say, exchanges of treasure for captives are more than a little tricky, with great potential for treachery.

The notion of parole is simple in comparison: The captive gives an oath to take no further part in whatever war or dispute is taking place, and returns home on his or her honor. By tradition, a parolee who is recaptured after breaking his or her word is put to death. Few monsters are honorable enough to give their parole without intent to break it immediately, but some are, especially civilized ones. Finally, captives are valuable as thralls or laborers.

Most heroes wouldn't sell their defeated foes into slavery, but giving them over into the hands of the authorities who can then put them to work is reasonable, especially if the sentence is fair and the conditions tolerable. Of course, captured heroes put to work as orc thralls or drow slaves are subject to all manner of abuse and brutality . . . but they're alive, and they have the chance to stage a heroic escape.

Regardless of whether it's the heroes or the monsters that initiate the conversation, or whether it's an

even parlay or a surrender, the other side always has the choice to listen or not listen. If the opposing side chooses to ignore the effort, the combat encounter continues. Otherwise, an accepted offer to parlay or surrender ends the combat encounter, and frequently begins a roleplaying or interaction encounter as the characters and their foes strike terms.

Feigned or Failed Parlay and Surrender

It's a dishonorable tactic, but many creatures aren't above pretending to surrender or offering a parlay to launch a surprise attack and catch their foes off guard. Most intelligent creatures are careful to keep their guard up when negotiations begin, and they don't begin to relax their vigilance until they know that they are dealing with an honorable (or thoroughly beaten) foe. Likewise, sometimes a parlay has an unfortunate outcome. The two sides realize that no accommodation can be reached, and further conversation becomes pointless.

Feigned Parlays: If the characters are the ones feigning participation, each character in the party makes a Bluff check (moderate difficulty or DC 10 + the best opponent's Insight modifier, DM's discretion). Each character who succeeds gains a surprise round against the monsters. If the heroes' adversaries are the ones feigning participation, each character makes an Insight check (easy difficulty or DC 10 + the best opponent's Bluff modifier, DM's discretion); each character who succeeds is not surprised when the monsters attack.

Reroll Initiative: When negotiation fails, reroll initiative. In most cases, this does not begin a new encounter. It's assumed that everyone remained battle-ready while the enemy's intentions weren't perfectly clear. Characters and monsters can benefit from a short rest only if the situation warrants it, and that decision is in the DM's hands. For example, if everyone puts away weapons, sits down around a table, and joins in a calm discussion lasting 10 minutes before someone tips over the table and leaps back onto his or her feet with weapons drawn, that could be considered a new encounter. If the two parties negotiate over drawn swords, it doesn't matter whether fighting resumes after 1 minute or 10; it's all the same encounter. When initiative is rerolled, one side might gain a surprise round through a form of treachery even if this is a continuation of a single encounter.

About the Author

Richard Baker is an award-winning game designer who has written numerous adventures and supplements, including *Manual of the Planes*™, the *Dark Sun*® *Campaign Guide*, and the D&D Gamma World® *Roleplaying Game*. He's a New York Times bestselling author of Forgotten Realms® novels such as *Condemnation*, the Last Mythal trilogy, and the Blades of the Moonsea series. Rich is currently the Design Manager for the Dungeons & Dragons game at Wizards of the Coast.

Dumped

BY SHELLY MAZZANOBLE
illustrations by William O'Conner

The signs were all there.

He was distant, short-sighted, and noncommittal.

He broke plans less than an hour before we were scheduled to meet.

When we did meet, he was distracted, as if he had at least ten other places he wanted to be.

"It's the new job," he emailed. "Just trying to catch up. I'll see you next week."

As the holidays neared, I chalked up his apathy and absentmindedness to trying to tie up loose ends before we left for winter break. I played it cool, not wanting to add to the pressure he was no doubt under. *Give him his space*, I thought. *We'll be back on track after the New Year.*

And then the email came. My friends might say *finally*. It was a frosty January Monday that got even chillier when I saw the subject line.

"CANCELED:
Wyld Stallyns Weekly D&D Game"

Yep. It was clear.

New DM had dumped us.

Reading the rest of the email, he explained: *Canceling indefinitely. No sense keeping this on the schedule.*

Indefinitely? No crueler words have ever been written. Except maybe *no sense*.

"Oh my God," I said, dropping my head onto my folded arms.

"What happened?" Chris asked, barely looking up from his Powerpoint presentation. "Tonight's *Gossip Girl* is a rerun?"

"Let me guess," Chuck said. "Nordstrom Rack had a sale and you missed it?"

I spun around to glare at Chuck. "Like that would happen. But no, this is much, much worse. You guys wouldn't understand."

"Okay," Chris said. "Never mind."

"We tried," Chuck said, putting his headphones back on.

I sighed. Loudly, so Chuck could hear. "It's over," I said. "It's really over."

"Fine, you win," Chris said, finally looking up. "What's over?"

"Nothing," I said. "Just my long-term, monogamous, seemingly committed relationship."

"Holy crap, really?" Chuck asked, looking genuinely concerned. "Didn't you two just get engaged?"

I brushed off the notion. "No, not him. My D&D group. That's four years worth of Tuesdays gone."

TM & © 2011 Wizards of the Coast LLC. All rights reserved.

"I'm not monogamous," Kierin said from his cubicle, "if that makes you feel better."

It didn't, but I appreciated the gesture. Just then, Marty came by our desks.

"Wow," he said. "The end of an era. What will Tabitha do with her spare time?"

I pictured Tabby, my tiefling wizard, and her friends parting ways at a tavern. Maybe having a few pints of mead and laughing about that big, climactic fight with the demons, when we threw the whistle that controlled them down into a rift—and then they just went and took it for themselves. Or the old pig farmer that kept doddering around, annoying Tabitha so much that she threatened to hit him with a *magic missile*. Or the troglodytes who were so stinky that smelling them literally caused us damage.

"She'll probably take some time to talk to a professional about her abandonment issues. And then take a nice, long, extended nap."

Sure, I've loved and lost at D&D. I've had other groups break up. My very first D&D group disbanded shortly after my book, *Confessions of a Part-Time Sorceress*, was published. (Coincidence?) We were only 7th level then, too.

These things happen. Someone goes on maternity leave; Dungeon Masters leave the company; your cleric gets a job on a different brand and can no longer justify playing D&D for two hours during the weekday. I guess I was OK with that earlier breakup because I felt that Astrid and I had learned everything she needed to, and it was time to move on.

But this time? This totally caught me off guard, even though the signs were clearer than a high schooler's complexion on Pro-Activ. I guess I was naive. We were the Wyld Stallyns! The outcasts! The group that all the other DM's gave New DM a hard time over!

"You DM for *those guys*?" They would jeer at him in the hallway. "You could totally do a lot better. Let me introduce you to my friend's sister's ex-boyfriend's group."

That may have been a tempting offer for New DM a year ago, when he scolded us for acting like petulant, rules-challenging toddlers. But he's shunning *all* DM duties around the office because of this new position. At least, that's what he told me.

"It's not you," he said when I saw him at the first-floor café. "It's me."

"I know," I said. "It's just so sad. We were so good together!"

"I just don't have time anymore. You guys deserve better."

I followed him to the elevator. "What if we played every two weeks instead? That would free up four hours a month!"

"I wish I could," he said walking faster. "I just got so busy."

"What about once a month? We can change! Just give us a chance!"

"I think I'm gonna take the stairs."

The first Tuesday afternoon post-dumping found me in the grip of anxiety and mild depression. Two-thirds of the members of my old group sit within three feet of each other, so it was noticeably odd for none of us to get up at 3:30 and make our way downstairs. We stayed in our chairs. Our dice stayed on the shelf. Our character sheets remained packed away. It was as if we were too afraid to look at each other. Would Laura see her own sorrow in my eyes? Would Hilary break down at the sound of a d20 hitting the desk? Would Kierin's façade crumble if he heard the familiar sounds of me chomping on Kashi Go-Lean cereal (my gaming snack of choice)?

I turned around to face them. "This is ridiculous," I said. "We need to talk about this."

"About what?" Kierin asked.

"*Real Housewives of Atlanta?*" Laura asked. "Yes! I was meaning to ask if you watched that yet."

"No, you guys," I said marveling at how deep their denial went. I thought *I* was taking it hard. "New DM breaking up with us. The Wyld Stallyns should be getting their marching orders from some arrogant, incompetent NPC right now! We're all hurting from this! Now is not the time to turn our backs on one another!"

"But did you watch *Real Housewives*?" Laura asked. "It was really, really good."

"I have a meeting," Kierin said. "Got to go."

"A meeting?" I yelled after him. "You scheduled a meeting now? Oh, too soon, Kierin! Too soon!"

For me, but not for them. Perhaps that was the worst part. Didn't our four years together mean anything? All those adventures, annoying NPCs, and inside jokes? The party members we loved and lost? The battle scars we couldn't wait to show off like next season's Birkin bag? Our backstories, characters' hopes and dreams, unaccomplished levels—just vapor in the ether?

WHAT HAPPENS AFTER LEVEL 7?

"Get hold of yourself!" Chris threw a pad of Post-It notes over the wall at me.

"I really need to get some new headphones," Chuck said.

"Was that my outside voice?" I asked. "Sorry about that."

"We'll try not to take it personally that you seem to have forgotten about your *other* D&D group," Chuck said.

"Yeah," said Chris. "The one I DM for."

Right. My Wednesday lunchtime D&D Encounters game that I play with Chuck and my boss and my boss's boss and a couple of co-workers from R&D and sales.

"But that's like *work*," I explained. "You know, so we know what's going on in the real world and can write stuff about it."

"Oh, I see how it is," Chuck said, turning back to his computer. "You're just playing because you *have* to. I get it."

"No," I said. "I don't *have* to. I want to. But it did kind of start that way, right?"

Chuck put his headphones on and held his hand up to me. The sounds of Lady Gaga filled his cube.

"Right, Chris?" I asked, but he too had forsaken my meltdown in favor of—what else—Stupid Powerpoint.

The following day, I headed to The Matrix, the conference room Chris had booked for us at lunchtime. I had a steaming Tupperware container of roasted cauliflower, a veggie burger, and of course Kashi Go-Lean. I took a seat next to Chuck.

"Hi, Chuckles."

He ignored me.

"I said 'Hi, Chuckles'."

"I heard you. I just don't want to take up valuable work time with pleasantries. Chris, shall we begin? I hate it when meetings don't start on time."

"Oh, stop it! I didn't mean it was like a *meeting*. Just that we were all kind of assigned to this game for various work reasons. Don't you need to test out the Twitter buffs? And you, Chris, aren't you playtesting the DM mechanics and reporting back to R&D? And Brian, you need to know what your accounts are talking about, right? We're like the Breakfast Club of D&D groups. Except more Anthony Michael Hall and less Emilio Estevez."

"No," they all said in unison.

"I begged Chris to let me join this group," Brian said. "It's my only D&D game."

Everyone around the table nodded their heads in agreement. Even my boss.

"I didn't make you play," she said to me. "I thought you wanted to."

"Of course I want to," tried to explain, but I could sense the mood starting to shift. I had become the Judd Nelson of the group. "I'm glad you all like playing in our Wednesday game. I just didn't know you *liked it* liked it."

It may have started out as a playtest, but it's clearly grown into something more.

The signs were all there.

Chuck's dwarf cavalier Duro constantly takes the damage meant for my lazy warpriest, Stormin' Norman.

When Laura's clumsy mage accidentally caught Norman in her frosty burst, costing him twelve points of damage, Laura felt bad for three days. I even got a lunch out of it.

And when Brian made some Brother Splinter-shield reference in a meeting we were in, and I was the only one who got it. Oh, man, how we laughed.

Yep, it was clear. We were more than friends. I was in a new D&D group. And I'd been taking them for granted.

All this time, while I was mourning the slow demise of the Wyld Stallyns, the right group had been right under my nose. A good, functional, respectful, fun-loving, damage-shielding, healing-surge-giving party. We have people who show up on time and share their lunches. We even have a DM who will come in on his day off rather than cancel our game.

It was definitely time to take this group to the next level.

"Umm, anyone want some Kashi?" I asked.

About the Author:
Roses are red, violets are blue, Shelly Mazzanoble appreciates your D&D group, too.

Bazaar of the Bizarre

The Beast of Talgora

By Scott Gable
Illustration by Tony Foti

We had been on the hunt for months, and its end was drawing near. We hadn't been as successful as we hoped to be. We decided to push beyond the game trails into the deep wilderness. Our explorations were rewarded when we noticed the scent. We soon noticed an intense, musky signature that none of us could identify, and our curiosity demanded that we continue onward.

Without warning, a thunderclap of a roar sent us staggering for cover. That roar was not a posture or a bluff; it was a promise of undying rage, an insistence on blood. As if the roar wasn't terrifying enough, it was followed by a lingering cacophony of growls, shrieks, and hisses that sounded like a dozen different beasts all hunting the same prey. This was worse than any animal sound; it echoed with torment and hate.

Whatever made that horrible sound was a good distance away from us, but with no idea what it was, we didn't know how fast it could move. We didn't run, but only because no one could agree on which direction the sound had come from. So we scrambled in amongst some fallen timber, put our backs to one another for protection, and waited.

We didn't wait for long.

TM & © 2011 Wizards of the Coast LLC. All rights reserved.

A tree, no more than fifty feet away, exploded into splinters. Before we could tell what caused it, more nearby trees fell to the same fate. Something big was rushing toward us and demolishing the forest as it came.

That's when we ran.

We were tearing through brambles and leaping across logs faster than we've ever moved when, directly in front of us, a strangely robed figure appeared out of nowhere. Erdel nearly blundered right into him, but this stranger knocked Erdel aside with a flick of his hand. I jumped in that direction, but before I reached Erdel, the robed figure bounded right past me without a glance. He was whispering something as he went by. I couldn't make out what it was. All I knew for sure was that he was charging toward the horror that we were running like madmen to get away from.

As he ran past, I got a good look at him, or at the parts of him where his cloak was pushed back, and I'd never seen anyone like him. His flesh was a latticework of tattoos—or maybe they were scars. Intricate patterns covered his shaved head and bare arms. Erdel is a big man. I don't think I could knock him down, but this tattooed stranger had bowled him over without breaking stride.

We struggled to get Erdel back on his feet and moving toward somewhere safe. We heard a terrific fight happening behind us. The trees were thick, and we could see detail only in flashes.

More robed, tattooed figures were closing in from all around. They were popping in and out of view as if they were teleporting—one moment, one of them would be standing on the ground, and the next moment, he'd be floating in the air above the trees. When they stood still for a few moments, something that looked like smoke trailed from their bodies, but there was no smell of smoke, and it didn't blow in the wind. It just drifted around them, as if nothing at all was happening. But the magic they hurled was churning the earth, torching the forest, tossing whole trees into the air, and setting off such bursts of lightning and thunder that I thought I'd be blinded and deafened, if I got away alive at all.

At the center of that storm was the creature. It was bigger than anything I've seen before or since, yet it glided between the tangled trees like a stag. We couldn't really see its form because of the blocking foliage, but we caught glimpses. It seemed more like a host of creatures than like a single beast. Every sighting seemed to contradict the last: a scaly, spined tail felling trees; beautiful gossamer wings as if from a giant butterfly; a thick mane whipping around a massive head; tusks that could impale a dragon. It was part mammal, part reptile, part bird, part insect—and I'm sure there were parts we didn't even see.

There was a terrible, primal, fluid magnificence in the way it fought. It was all the violence of nature concentrated into a single creature.

All of these thoughts came to me later. In that moment, we were focused entirely on getting away. Whatever that creature was, it wasn't meant to be seen by people like you and me. Erdel was on his feet by now. We ran until the sounds of the fight faded far into the distance, and we kept running until nightfall.

So it is that I am here to tell you this tale.

It's not necessary to travel the planes to find staggering power and terror. Many unexplored wilds and even nearby lands hold frightening secrets. The natural world has more than enough surprises left in the form of terrifying beasts of myth and legend.

The Beast of Talgora

One such creature is the Beast of Talgora. Its body was slain ages ago, but its presence still lingers in the world.

The physical form of the Beast of Talgora was considered by some to be the progenitor of all animals, and by others as their culmination—the state toward which all natural creatures unknowingly strive. Still others believe that it was an accident of nature, a freak that was never meant to exist and never could again.

Its appearance combined features from many creatures—fur, feathers, scales, and more. Though its body perished long ago, its power survives, trapped within portions of its carcass that survived as relics but are now dispersed to the four points of the compass.

Each of these items—such as the whip made from the vertebrae of its tail or the orb made from one of its mineralized eyes—is a potent item, brimming with primal magic. As the items are drawn together, they become ever more powerful and eventually form a set of items with a will of its own.

The Black Call

Killing the Beast of Talgora was no small feat. It consumed centuries of effort, many deaths, and the most potent magic. It took the effort of a powerful cabal of spellcasters to finally accomplish the task. The Black Call, as these spellcasters name themselves, wanted to control the beast and harness its incredible power for their own purposes. They never fully grasped the magnitude of the beast's strength, however. Ultimately, they could not contain it and were forced to kill it.

Even though they killed the beast, being killed is not necessarily the same as being dead. The beast's physical form was slain, but its primal essence persists and strives to return fully to life. If it does so, the beast will pursue its one, overpowering obsession: to wreak vengeance against the Black Call.

The Black Call realized this truth after the beast's death. To protect itself, it conveyed the various relics made from the beast to distant locations where they could not interact with one another. The organization still hopes that someday it might devise a way to bring the creature back to life and harness its power.

The Black Call is not widely known. Secrecy is its chief protection. Members live in seclusion while researching the darkest of arcane lore. They work together only for the sake of knowledge and power. Members tolerate one another's presence only as much as they are useful to one another. When they join together as the Black Call, it is certain that their need is great, and the prospect for gain is even greater.

The Returning Beast

Such a wellspring of life as the Beast of Talgora cannot be quelled forever. The beast possesses such a burning will to live that, despite its having been "slain," its spirit yet claws ceaselessly behind death's door. It persists within the collection of magic items known as the Returning Beast.

Each item is composed of a portion of the beast's body. To make good on its return, it must find and reunite those hidden pieces of its carcass. As its strength grows, it will feed its hunger for vengeance against the Black Call by tracking its members down one by one and destroying them without mercy.

The item set is a collection of six paragon tier magic items: *bands of equilibrium*, *eye of prophecy*, *razortail*, *ring of the deep wood*, *blade of the stalking predator*, and *totem of the dancing leaf*. These items house the remaining essence of the Beast of Talgora. As pieces are brought together, a primal intelligence becomes apparent to the items' wielders. If all of the items are reunited, the Beast of Talgora's spirit will try to force its way back into the world with the help of whoever possesses the items, whether or not those possessors are willing agents.

Roleplaying the Returning Beast

The Beast of Talgora's spirit cannot control the items that house it or those that wield them, but its powerful presence is always felt. It doesn't speak, but its intense emotions and broken, violent thoughts bubble constantly through the minds of its wielders. It subtly urges its wielders to push forward, to seek out its remains, and to hunt members of the Black Call. It craves conflict of every kind and urges characters toward any that comes within reach. It favors brashness and confidence.

Goals of the Returning Beast

- ✦ Return to life.
- ✦ Exact revenge on the Black Call.
- ✦ Destroy anyone and anything in its way.

Lore

Nature DC 15: The Beast of Talgora died long ago, but that hasn't prevented its spirit, consumed by undying primal rage, from trying to force its way back to life. The legendary creature's remains are still capable of channeling a portion of its unbridled power. When items made from its body are brought together, they can exert an insidious influence over their owners.

Nature DC 20: When the items are separated, they gently and subtly pull toward one another. An individual wielding one item might find himself or herself inexplicably drawn to the location of another. As the number of items in proximity increases, so does the pull toward the others. If the items are again separated, the intelligence that they display as a set weakens accordingly.

FOR THE DM

If any of these items find their way into your campaign, then the beast and the Black Call become potential hooks for you to hang adventures on.

- ✦ Characters could meet members of the Black Call who seek information about the items, who are tracking one of the items, or who are hiring adventurers to accompany an expedition to recover one of the items.
- ✦ A member of the Black Call might offer to buy items that the characters own. He probably won't reveal why he wants these particular magic items. He might pretend to be chiefly interested in a different magic item, but offer to pay considerably more than the market rate for several things at once. The Black Call won't be deterred by a refusal to sell. It will take whatever steps it deems necessary to acquire the items, including theft and even assassination.
- ✦ If items are brought together, they start influencing events in the area. All of the items don't need to be owned by the player characters. If a character owns one, an NPC owns another, and a third is locked in a vault nearby, they become aware of one another and begin exerting their will. The range of their influence is up to you; 5 miles is a reasonable distance for two items to communicate across, and they might be aware of each other at much greater distance. As more items become involved, their range and influence can increase.
- ✦ Nonplayer characters are excellent foils for the beast's will. They are likely to fall under its sway more quickly than hardened adventurers such as the player characters, and they can be more compliant with its goals. A villain (or a branch of the Black Call) might want the beast brought back to life.

No rules are provided here to cover the beast's return to life. Exactly what needs to happen to bring about its revival is left up to you. If enough pieces of the set are brought together to make the beast's resurgence a possibility, you should design the beast and build quests around it to suit your campaign. An adventure to track and slay the rampaging Beast of Talgora could be the focus of an entire level, if not two or three.

Nature DC 25: Legends suggest that when the Beast of Talgora's remains are brought together, their powers grow proportionally. The beast can be restored to life when all of the existing items are reunited. Destroying individual items does not prevent the beast from returning, but its strength will be diminished because of the absent pieces.

Nature DC 30: Those of the Black Call have secreted themselves away to continue their research. They have been aware of the Returning Beast and its intentions for some time. Individual members take whatever precautions they deem appropriate; some have acquired one or two of the items and hidden them in what they believe are secure places.

RETURNING BEAST ITEMS

Lvl	Name	Price (gp)	Item Slot
12	Razortail	13,000	Weapon
14	Blade of the stalking predator	21,000	Weapon
15	Eye of prophecy	25,000	Wondrous item
15	Totem of the dancing leaf	25,000	Implement
18	Bands of equilibrium	85,000	Arms
18	Ring of the deep wood	85,000	Ring

RETURNING BEAST BENEFITS

Pcs	Benefit
2	Each ally who bears a piece of the Returning Beast gains an item bonus to death saving throws equal to the number of allies who bear one or more items from this set.
5	Each ally who bears an item from this set ignores difficult terrain.

Bands of Equilibrium — Level 18 Uncommon

These bracers are made from bands of the ivory tusks and layers of the snakelike hide taken from the legendary Beast of Talgora.

Item Slot: Arms 85,000 gp
Property: When you score a critical hit, the target is also dazed until the end of its next turn. Natural creatures are immune to this effect.
Power (Daily): Minor Action. Choose a melee weapon you are holding. Until the end of the encounter, that weapon gains the brutal 1 property, but only when you attack with it.

Blade of the Stalking Predator — Level 14 Rare

This sickle is made from one of the talons of the legendary Beast of Talgora.

Lvl 14 +3 21,000 gp
Weapon: Sickle
Enhancement: Attack rolls and damage rolls
Critical: +3d8 damage (+3d10 against a bloodied enemy), and the target's speed is reduced by 1 (save ends).
Property: You gain darkvision while holding the weapon.
Power (Encounter): Minor Action. *Attack:* Ranged 5 (one creature); +17 vs. Reflex. *Hit:* Until the end of your next turn, the target grants combat advantage and gains no benefit from any concealment or invisibility.

Eye of Prophecy — Level 15 Uncommon

This large crystal is actually a mineralized eye from the legendary Beast of Talgora.

Wondrous Item 25,000 gp
Property: You can perform the Commune with Nature and Speak with Nature rituals. The rituals' component costs are halved, and it takes half the normal time to complete the rituals. You also gain a +4 item bonus to any Nature checks involved in the rituals.
Power (Daily): Minor Action. You have blindsight 5 until the end of the encounter.

Razortail — Level 12 Rare

This whip is made from vertebrae and razor-sharp spines taken from the legendary Beast of Talgora's tail.

Lvl 12 +3 13,000 gp
Weapon: Whip
Enhancement: Attack rolls and damage rolls
Critical: +3d8 damage
Property: Characters who have a primal class are automatically proficient with this whip.
Property: You gain a +2 item bonus to the attack rolls of opportunity attacks made with the whip.
Power (Encounter): Free Action. *Trigger:* You hit a target with a weapon attack using the whip. *Effect:* You grab the target until the end of your next turn. Until the grab ends, you can't make attacks with the whip, and the target takes ongoing 10 damage. *Sustain Minor:* The grab persists until the end of your next turn.

Ring of the Deep Wood — Level 18 Uncommon

This ring is made of intricately braided hair from the legendary Beast of Talgora's mane. The ring's magic strikes fear into your foes and calls insects of ancient forests to your aid.

Item Slot: Ring 85,000 gp
Property: When you push a creature, you can increase the distance of the push by 1 square.
Power (Encounter F Zone): Minor Action. *Effect:* You create a zone in a close burst 1. The zone lasts until the end of your next turn. Any enemy that enters the zone or starts its turn there is slowed and takes a –2 penalty to attack rolls until the end of its next turn. *Milestone:* If you've reached at least one milestone today, you can sustain the zone until the end of your next turn as a minor action. You can sustain the zone only once per encounter..

Totem of the Dancing Leaf — Level 15 Uncommon

This rod is made from one of the legendary Beast of Talgora's dorsal spines. Three leaves of the extinct gossamer tree drift around you whenever this totem is held in your hand.

Lvl 15 +3 25,000 gp
Implement: Totem
Enhancement: Attack rolls and damage rolls
Critical: +3d8 damage
Power (Daily): Immediate Interrupt. *Trigger:* You or an adjacent ally is hit by a melee or a ranged attack. *Effect:* The triggering character gains resist 10 to all damage dealt by the attack during this turn.
Special: This power is usable three times per day, once for each of the floating leaves.

About the Author

Scott Gable is a freelance editor and game designer. He currently edits for Open Design's award-winning *Kobold Quarterly* magazine, blog, and patron projects, including *Courts of the Shadow Fey* and *Tales of the Old Margreve*. His most recent game design is for Zombie Sky Press, including *The Faerie Ring*. He calls the beautiful underwater city of Seattle his home.

Dragon # 396 | Editorial Archive | 2/7/2011

Thank You, John Lydgate

Dragon Editorial

by Steve Winter

The flavor-vs.-crunch balance in online articles—that eternal struggle between introducing a host of new feats, powers, paragon paths, and epic destinies, and focusing on material that enriches the game without raising the rules overhead—continues to be a hotly discussed issue. What's clear from the debate both online and in email to dndinsider@wizards.com is that no matter what balance we strike, there will always be people who want primarily crunch and others who demand primarily story. It's an old tale, but it's true—you can't please all of the people all of the time.

What you can do, if Brother Lydgate is to be trusted, is please all of the people some of the time. Or, if looked at in a different light, you can please some of the people today and some other people tomorrow.

Moving onward into 2011, that will be our guiding principle when selecting articles. People who thrive on lots of crunch will get it—in some articles. People who dig inspiring story elements will get those—in some articles. People who like their chocolate and peanut butter mixed together in a tasty snack will get that, too—in some articles.

This month, for the high-crunch crowd, we offer "Genasi of Athas," a treatment of these elemental souls that presents new manifestations, backgrounds, a racial paragon path, and a few feats. "Hierophant Druids" borrows some ideas from 1st Edition AD&D to introduce a new druidic order, a few epic tier evocations, and an epic destiny for those desiring to reach the pinnacle of primal might.

For those who enjoy delving into the world's history and its effect on the present, we offer "The Last Legion." Later in the month, "Bards of Wolfstone" will present the tale of these accomplished leaders along with a few of the abilities that make them special.

That's a sampling of what's coming up in February. It's not a change in direction, but more like a slight course adjustment. With it, we expect that readers will always find a few articles catering directly to their particular preference every month, whether they lean toward the technical or toward the tasty.

One thing that is absolutely, unquestionably true is that we like getting email. We don't have the time to respond to most of it, but we read everything. The inbox has seen a lot of traffic in recent months, with opinions coloring the full spectrum. We're not shy about asking for opinions, so don't be shy about sending them to dndinsider@wizards.com. Share your thoughts, express your feelings, or propose things you'd like to read in coming months.

While we're on the subject of email—some of what we receive is so insightful and well-expressed that it's a shame we're the only ones who see it. Beginning later this month, we'll gather some of the most thought-provoking "letters to the editor" into an article. We already have a dedicated crowd of opinion-sharers in our forums, and we're all for that. A forum post, however, draws far fewer eyes than an online article. In the interest of stirring active, constructive debate, we're going to try this on for a few months and test the response. So now you have another reason to hit us at dndinsider@wizards.com.

Dragon # 396 | Ampersand Archive | 2/9/2011 New!

Grab Some Mid-Winter Heat

Ampersand

by Bill Slavicsek

It's been a crazy winter all across the country. Tons of snow. Record cold. Dogs and cats. You get the idea. This month, I've got a little bit of heat to inject into the cold days of February. Namely, a bunch of news related to the *Dark Sun Campaign Setting*, the ultimate expression of dust and fire in the D&D multiverse. And that's not all! Let's get started …

And the Winner Is …

The recent "Cast Your Role" promotion, with the chance to earn a role in the upcoming SyFy original **Dungeons & Dragons** movie, "The Book of Vile Darkness," has ended and a winner has been selected. Congratulations to Stephen P. from Eldersburg, Maryland and his character, Lurk the half-elf mage. From Stephen's entry:

> *Lurk was born with no name in a slave pit filled with humans and dwarves. He never knew his family. He wandered the pits at night, earning the name Lurk. He spent his childhood abused, learning to suppress his emotions so he could ignore the pain. A wizard oversaw the slave pit, using the captives to tests his spells. Lurk became the wizard's favorite, and after time he learned to cast spells of his own. He used this power to destroy the wizard and the slaves, leaving the only home he had known in ashes as he stepped out into the world.*

Wow. That's one hardcore half-elf! More details on Lurk, Stephen P., and the upcoming movie will be revealed in the months ahead.

The March Has Started!

The *March of the Phantom Brigade*, that is! The new season of D&D Encounters begins tonight, so check out the D&D Encounters web page and the store locator to find a participating location near you. This season, the new *D&D Fortune Cards* are available to use in play. This optional element adds minor boosts and twists of fate to the game. Twitter buffs, which have been a part of the program, have been modified to work in conjunction with the *D&D Fortune Cards*, making every adventure even more exciting. So create a character and find a store! Only you can help solve the mystery of the Ghost Tower of Inverness and the Phantom Brigade!

Wrath of Ashardalon

Look for the newest Adventure System Board Game, *Wrath of Ashardalon*, this month. In the tradition of the Castle Ravenloft Board Game, Wrath of Ashardalon is a cooperative adventure experience that can be played solo or with up to five players. It comes complete with 13 scenarios, a configurable and ever-changing dungeon, and more than 40 plastic playing pieces—including the huge red dragon, Ashardalon. The two games work together if you want to mix and match pieces. Check out the upcoming scenarios that will be available here on the website for adventures that use heroes, monsters, and other components from both boxed sets. Challenge Ashardalon and his minions—if you dare!

This Month in *Dragon*: Genasi of Athas

Rob Schwalb explores the genasi race and how it fits into the ecology of the world of the *Dark Sun Campaign Setting*. The article presents a complete racial treatment of these "half-elementals," designed to work with the strong elemental nature of Athas. If you want to turn up the heat and take advantage of the elemental framework of

the *Dark Sun* campaign, take a look at this material when it goes live later this month.

This Month in *Dungeon*: Beneath the Dust

"Beneath the Dust," an adventure set in the *Dark Sun* campaign setting, debuts this month. When a living relic from a long-forgotten age is discovered, it could mean salvation or destruction for the world of heat and sand. The relic, a seed from a primordial Tree of Life, can be used to restore vitality to the world. Or, in the hands of a defiler, to increase the power of a dark magic-user. Author Jared Espley is making his first appearance in *Dungeon* online with this gripping adventure. "Beneath the Dust" can be a great set piece for a *Dark Sun* campaign, or with a little work it can be modified to use in any campaign setting. Check it out.

***Dark Sun* Comic**

If you haven't been following the great D&D comics coming from IDW Publishing, this is the ideal time to get in on the action. Issue #2 of *Dark Sun* goes on sale today. This is the first comics series ever set in the world of Athas, and writer Alex Irvine and artist Peter Bergting are pulling out all the stops for this five-issue miniseries. Ask your comic book retailer how you can get a copy of the rare Module Edition of the issue, or the super-rare black-and-white cover by artist Andy Brase. Check IDW Publishing's website for more details.

Next Month

More news. More product information. And a preview or two of upcoming releases. Until then,

Keep playing!

Until then, keep playing!

In Case You Don't Know Him

Bill Slavicsek's gaming life was forever changed when he discovered **Dungeons & Dragons** in 1976. He became a gaming professional in 1986 when he was hired by West End Games as an editor. He quickly added developer, designer, and creative manager to his resume, and his work helped shape the *Paranoia*, *Ghostbusters*, *Star Wars*, and *Torg* roleplaying games. He even found some time during that period to do freelance work for D&D 1st Edition. In 1993, Bill joined the staff of TSR, Inc. as a designer/editor. He worked on a bunch of 2nd Edition material, including products for Core D&D, *Dark Sun*, *Ravenloft*, and *Planescape*. In 1997, he was part of the TSR crowd that moved to Seattle to join Wizards of the Coast, and in that year he was promoted to R&D Director for D&D. In that position, Bill oversaw the creation of both the 3rd Edition and 4th Edition of the D&D Roleplaying Game. He was one of the driving forces behind the *D&D Insider* project, and he continues to oversee and lead the creative strategy and effort for **Dungeons & Dragons**.

Bill's enormous list of credits includes *Alternity*, *d20 Star Wars*, *The Mark of Nerath* Dungeons & Dragon novel, *Eberron Campaign Setting*, the *D&D For Dummies* books, and his monthly *Ampersand (&)* column for *Dragon* Magazine.

©1995 - 2011 Wizards of the Coast LLC, a subsidiary of Hasbro, Inc. All Rights Reserved.

Dungeon # 396 | D&D Alumni Archive | 2/18/2011 New!

Ghost Tower of Inverness

D&D Alumni

Bart Carroll

For fans of traps and hazards, this should be a familiar image:

From the *Dungeon Master's Guide* (page 93): A strange, many-faceted gem in the center of the chamber suddenly emits blasts of blinding light. Special: Each round, roll a 1d8 to determine the direction of the blast.

Yes, folks, that describes the soul gem, a formerly deadly object turned into a powerful trap (along with the *sphere of annihilation*). If you've ever wondered where this gem came from, wonder no further! In this installment of *D&D Alumni*, we look back at the soul gem's origins in *Ghost Tower of Inverness*, which features as a key setting in Season 4 of **D&D Encounters** (**March of the Phantom Brigade**).

The Original Soul Gem

Let's cut straight to the end of the adventure. Hidden away in its tower, the soul gem was likened to a great white diamond that glowed with the brilliance of the sun, and the wizard Galap-Dreidel used it against those who opposed his will. The light of the gem dragged the souls of creatures screaming from their mortal flesh and trapped them within its many facets (which recalls, of course, the jeweled skull of a demilich). And yet the goal of the adventure was to recover the gem and return it to the great Seer of Urnst (a mysterious magician not above putting a geas on the party to complete the quest).

Instead of having to overcome a grand villain at the end, adventurers discovered that the gem was the final obstacle. It floated in the center of the room, firing off dazzling white rays toward random d8 sections of the room (sound familiar?). Anyone coming under fire needed to make a saving throw. Make the saving throw, and you were drained of all color and your magic items of all magic—and that's for making the saving throw. Fail it, and your soul was sucked out of your body and drawn into the gem (again, just like a demilich):

When the white light strikes the victim, he (or she) screams horribly—a long, drawn-out wailing scream. As your vision clears, an image of the character, pale and ghostly, streams out of the body and toward the Soul Gem getting smaller the nearer it gets. As the image shrinks in size, the volume of its screams diminishes. When it reaches the Gem, there is a burst of radiance, and the image is gone. The character's form lies motionless on the floor; the body is dead white, as are all the character's possessions.

Winning the gem required beating away on the invisible force sphere surrounding it. And here was one more trick still: Each point of damage done to the sphere inflicted an equal amount against the attacker. Thankfully, the sphere had only 20 hit points to begin with (plus you also gained tournament points for however much damage you dealt).

Yet unlike a demilich, smashing the soul gem (scoring a natural 20 against it with a magic weapon) was not advised. Doing so freed the millions of souls trapped inside, and they would go on a killing rampage against every living creature in the area (and would of course deny tournament points for returning the soul gem). Alternatively, a successful party could return the gem to the seer, who would offer to return trapped characters to their own bodies (if their bodies were recovered) or, less happily, to other bodies if necessary.

The Ghost Tower

And that final encounter concluded the adventure. The bulk of *C2: Ghost Tower of Inverness* naturally involved finding this gem, hidden away in the namesake tower: a ruined keep filled with all manner of oddities and encounters.

Originally played as a tournament module (back at the 1979 Detroit Wintercon), the *Ghost Tower of Inverness* provided a number of opportunities to add or subtract to your score (for example, you added +10 to your score for prodding loose rubble; -5 if your characters spent 3 or more turns clearing it). A lot of these scoring opportunities came in the tower's strange puzzle rooms, which included a room holding bugbears in suspended animation, a room that needed to be navigated as if your characters were chess pieces, and a room with reverse gravity used to access the next level by falling up into it.

The first portion of the adventure involved a "plot coupon" search for four pieces of a key that were necessary to access the rest of the tower, but in reality, the key transported the party back in time to the tower when it was in its prime. From there, characters had to navigate levels of the tower keyed to the four elementals. A medusa in her rose garden guarded the exit from the earth level; a fire giant guarded the fire level; a hierosphinx watched over the air level; and a pack of ixitxachitl protected the water level (and this section included elaborate rules for removing armor and possessions and treading water successfully).

A metal hatch led from the water level to the great domed jewel room, and, as we've mentioned, to the dangers of the soul gem.

March of the Phantom Brigade

So, what does *Ghost Tower of Inverness* have to do with the latest season of **D&D Encounters**? Plenty. Designer Rodney Thompson admits to using the tower for inspiration within this season's adventure.

As people of the Nentir Vale know, ghost towers exist as focal points for spirit activity. The **Dungeons & Dragons** *Starter Set* (the "Red Box") mentioned the Ghost Tower of the Witchlight Fens. Now it appears that the Ghost Tower of Inverness has also appeared in the Nentir Vale (along with a third tower somewhere in the vale as well, though the exact location of the third tower is in dispute).

Without revealing too much of the season, we will say that players have the chance to revisit the ruins of Inverness.

You might even catch a winking nod to Galap-Dreidel!

March of the Phantom Brigade launched February 9th, but you can join in any week of the entire **D&D Encounters** season. Interested in playing? Find out more about **D&D Encounters** on our events page, including the adventure's backstory, its downloadable characters—and where to find a game near you!

Bart Carroll

Bart Carroll is neither the result of genetic experimentation by some insane wizard, nor a nightmarish creature loathsome beyond description (though he has been called both); a medium natural humanoid, he joined Wizards of the Coast in the spring of 2004. Originally producing their licensed property websites (including *Star Wars* and G.I. Joe), he transitioned to the D&D website, where he's remained part of the D&D Insider Team. In this role, he generates website content in support of the 4th Edition line of products, the online magazines, and the gamer lifestyle—of which he is an extremely proud adherent.

©1995 - 2011 Wizards of the Coast LLC, a subsidiary of Hasbro, Inc. All Rights Reserved.